

Towards an Understanding of Student Perceptions of Feedback

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Introduction

Most students and teachers would agree that feedback is an important element in language learning. However, while concerns over how to provide feedback to student's writing has received significant attention in literature, the exact role feedback plays and the influence it has on language learning remains contested and often unclear. As Saito (1994) states, "there are still questions of what would be the most effective approach to improve students' writing skills and what approach would fit the needs of particular students" (p. 46). One unanimous finding that does emerge from the various studies is that providing feedback to language learners is a complex issue which is deeply interwoven into the larger framework of the language learning process. The type of feedback, the importance of feedback and the influence it has on the learning process is a multifaceted and complex process situated within *localities of learning* and may be different for different learners in different contexts. An understanding of feedback may hence be limited to learners and the context within which it is observed.

One of the major factors which plays a crucial role in the feedback is the learners themselves. The learners' beliefs and perceptions of feedback are important in determining their responses and reactions to feedback. In multicultural classrooms, with students from diverse backgrounds, it is most likely that most students, having gone through different learning experiences, will have differing beliefs and perceptions. Student beliefs regarding all aspects of learning, including feedback, are important because, as Leki and Carson (1994) point out, student perceptions on learning affect their learning. These beliefs in turn determine how they approach the learning situation and could be in part responsible for the fact that "learners vary greatly in their response to feedback" (Cohen, 1991, p. 138).

The present study sets out to explore some of the beliefs and perceptions which students have regarding feedback. Cohen (1991) also states that research suggests that there may be a "misfit" between the feedback provided by teachers and what students would like to get. This may hinder learners from making the best use of the feedback they receive. Research indicates that students have definite preferences for certain types of

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feedback and have certain beliefs and attitudes towards feedback (Goldstein, 2004). With reference to Ferris (1999), Goldstein (2004) states:

In order for teachers to comment as effectively as possible and for students to be open to using our commentary, we need to understand and acknowledge student reactions and preferences for feedback (p. 70)

Taking this cue, the present study is aimed towards exploring feedback from the student perspective and delves into their beliefs and reactions regarding feedback and its role in making them better ESL writers in western academe. Our study is undertaken in part fulfillment of the requirements of a graduate course of study and is more exploratory than experimental in nature. It is a step towards heightening, as English language teachers, our own awareness of feedback and its complex nature. While we do not aim to make any generalizable discoveries, we do hope that our findings will be at least thought-provoking, if not useful and of interest, to other language teachers.

Having provided a general introduction to the paper, the next section in this paper will describe the study and the methods of data collection. The section will be divided into five subsections: an outline of the research questions; description of the classroom context; background on the participants; description of data collection; and an outline of hedges in this study. Section four will deal with the analysis of data from participant interviews divided into seven subsections, each dealing with a various aspect of feedback. This will be followed by the conclusion to our study.

The study

Research questions

The following set of research questions was used to guide our exploration of written feedback in ESL classrooms.

1. What beliefs do students hold regarding teacher written feedback?
2. Do students have any preference for certain types of feedback?
3. What do students do with the feedback they receive?

Classroom context

It is apparent that the classroom context and the complex interplay of relations between student, teacher and content affect all that happens within the classroom. As cautioned by Conrad and Goldstein (1999), “texts and comments do not exist independently of course contexts” (p. 150). Hence, it is important to take the classroom context into consideration when exploring any of the various features or relationship, such as feedback, embedded

within this context.

The participants of this study come from two ESLA—English as second language for academic purpose, writing classes considered as the “intermediate” and “high intermediate” 1500 level of proficiency at Carleton University. Both classes had the same teachers and followed the same scheme of work. The course is the penultimate ESLA course students go through, before they enter mainstream classes in degree programs of their choice. Students enrolled in this ESLA course may enroll in one mainstream course from their undergraduate major. The two classes, where the participants of this study came from, are unique in the university in that they have two teachers who teach as a team; one teaches the first half of the course and the other takes over from that point onwards. The other unique feature of these classes is that they followed the recently popularized pedagogy of Sustained Content Based Instruction (CBI).

Sustained CBI argues that a context for learning analytical/critical thinking skills can be found in language classes which stimulate the demand of academic work and this requires students to practice academic skills with scaffolding from language teachers. In the sustained CBI students study one discipline for a full semester, progressing through various aspects of a larger topic such that later concepts and information rely on earlier ones—just as students in content classes do (Pally 2000). Therefore, in ESLA 1500 students learn how to become skillful academic writers and be able to cope with the writing expected during their subsequent four-years of undergraduate studies. That is the drive of the two expert teachers’ and their pedagogy.

The structure of the class is hence similar to an undergraduate content class and the tasks and assignments which are expected of the students are similar to those which would be expected of them in a content class. The tasks and assignments are broken into small parts so that students go over the content repeatedly and recycle their vocabulary and the rhetorical structures which are expected of them. While no single piece of writing appears to undergo a “writing process”, taken as a whole, the course seems to embody the concept. Students did not rewrite or revise a particular piece of writing based on the feedback they received. However, extensive writing is done during the course and since each piece of writing recycles the vocabulary and rhetorical patterns in writing and is thus similar, students may be able to use the feedback they receive in one assignment, when writing the following one. It was also observed that the teacher gave back extensive written feedback often on the students’ assignments as marginalia and on separate sheets. The students spend a lot of time writing frequently and at length in order to learn how to write academic prose. Students also had the opportunity to meet with the teacher during office hours to discuss any issues and concerns they might have. It was observed and understood

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from the teacher's comments that students often used this opportunity to meet with the teacher, especially after they have received a marked written assignment. An important observation to note is that most of the writing which the students did were marked and had a bearing on the final score for the course. The classes meet twice a week for periods of 3 hours each.

The participants

Participants in this study are four (4) volunteer students, one male and one female from each of the two classes. All participants are overseas students, having completed their high school in their home countries and have been in Canada for less than two-years. Participants are in their late teens and are enrolled in one course in their respective majors, in addition to the ESLA course. The English language proficiency of the participants is considered to be upper intermediate, based on their level of enrollment in the ESLA program and their use of language during the interviews. They were asked whether they wished to use a pseudonym for the study or use their real names. Based on their wishes, the real name of Xiao is used for the study, while Marco, Nazim and Maryam are used as pseudonyms for the other three participants.

Student	Sex	Country	L1	Major
Xiao	F	China	Chinese	BA Mass Comm.
Marco	M	Qatar	Arabic	BA Comm. Engineering Design
Nazim	M	Lebanon	Arabic	BA Economics
Maryam	F	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	BA Engineering

Table 1: Background information on participants

Data

Data collection process began through classroom observation. The purpose of classroom observation was twofold: [a] to grasp an idea of the course and the class - the context within which the present study is situated [b] to introduce and establish the worth of both the research and the researchers to allure the participants. After having made ourselves familiar with the classes and having described the study to the two classes, an open invitation was extended to all students by requesting interested students to get in touch with the researchers through e-mails. This open invitation was made after consultation with the teacher who had indicated that approaching individual students directly might not be a very good idea considering the high stakes that the course held for them. Although the open invitation approach was less threatening and less obliging for the participants, there was initial apprehension that volunteers might not come forward. However, as students

became more familiar with our presence and got to know more about the research through informal discussions, they were more forthcoming.

The timing was propitious to go into the two ESLA classrooms because students had arrived at half way of the course and had taken an in-class mid term exam for which the teacher used the first time a new evaluation scale form that was new to the teacher and the student. Our study did not focus into the students' point of view, acceptance, approval or not of the new form particularly, but during interviews with student-participants they did voice spontaneously their views because beforehand we decided, if appropriate, we would refer to the writing they did for the in-class mid term and the new evaluation scale form. One of the collaborators for this study managed to process a partly think aloud protocol during the one hour recorded interview with one of the student-participant focusing on the written feedback on the evaluation scale form, however the focus was not on the new form but on how and what the student does with feedback received from the teacher. Since data generated from this one think aloud protocol happened with only one student-participant and not all, we decided to incorporate the resulting data from the think-aloud-protocol as part and parcel of the whole data result.

The present study is based mainly on the data gathered from interviews with the four volunteer participants. Each participant was interviewed once by the researcher with whom the participant had initially made contact. The interviews, each of which was around one hour long, were taped and later transcribed for analysis. The interviews were kept relatively informal and unstructured in order to permit spontaneous speech, while the same set of guiding questions (see appendix 1) was used by each researcher in to maintain unity of our collaborative study. Each of the interviews was transcribed by the respective researcher and the transcriptions were e-mailed amongst the collaborators for analysis. Thus four hours of transcribed interviews of the respective collaborators became our study's data result.

In addition, each collaborator of this study met with the student-participant for a follow up session based on the interview with the objective of ensuring greater reliability on interpretation between interviewee and interviewer. During the follow up interview which was held about a week later with each of our student-participant, we noticed a greater awareness and a preciseness of opinion from the student-participants. At these follow up meetings we pursued clarification to enhance our understanding and interpretation of the participants' responses in the transcribed recorded session.

One collaborator took over the task to cluster the data under subcategories relating to different aspects of feedback. This initial categorization of our study was subsequently reviewed by the three research-collaborators. The analysis of the data and the writing, revising and rewriting

of the paper was a collaborative process in its fullest sense with all three research-collaborators working together as a team.

As mentioned earlier, this study is more exploratory than experimental in design and is a modest approach to heighten our understanding and awareness of the role of feedback in language classrooms, rather than make any sweeping statements. Any findings of the study are limited by the small number of participants involved and the lack of exploration into the teacher's perspective of feedback. The limited time available for the study, both for the researchers and the participants, prevented us from making further explorations of the data, such as the probing of 'hot spots' (Woods, 1996) that seem to have sprung from the greater awareness generated during the follow up session with the participants of our study.

Data Analysis & Discussion

The perceptions of our participants on feedback are grouped into seven categories related to various aspects of feedback: general beliefs, understanding feedback, grammar, peer feedback, positive and negative feedback, oral feedback, and what our participants do with feedback. Based on the limited number of participants, their experience with and reaction to written feedback our study wrought the following premises.

General beliefs about feedback

Participants came up with differing general beliefs about feedback. Their beliefs seemed to have been informed by the feedback they received prior to and the current experiences. While all of them agree that feedback helps, they have different opinions regarding various aspects of feedback. About the amount of feedback Maryam and Xiao think it is really helpful and Xiao loves it and she is disappointed if or when not given a lot of feedback. Both agree that in Mathematics, feedback is not necessary because it involves numbers and solving problems. For Xiao, since primary school

“...feedback is the only purpose for me to study....I do not know why I have to study...but I got the score and the teacher wrote excellent or well done, that is the only purpose for me to study.”

Xiao and Maryam learn from feedback and Maryam says

“I like reading feedback yeah...sometimes I can't apply it in the next research ... but I think it's very

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helpful...Specially in the writing assignments...helps us to stay away from mistakes.”

Maryam adds that sometimes students read it and think there is no benefit from reading it for the next assignment, but if “...*teacher doesn't write what mistakes and at least some feedback... we keep making mistakes again and again.*”

On the other side, Nazim and Marco agree in that a lot of feedback does not help them. Nazim believes that feedback helped him to improve “*little bit, not that much*”, and he needs to improve more. He believes specific and “*small*” feedback is better than a lot of feedback

“...a lot of feedback would... feel ashamed of myself that I don't know how to write...so a small feedback would be... would be fine... Yeah more specific... give me the ideas or give me the specific thing that I have to do that's it.”

For Marco, feedback “...*depends on what is coming up...in the next stage ... this feedback is important... is pretty important.... then I will go and have a look on it.*” For him to write often to write over and over again helps. Xiao also mentioned that to write often helps her but she thinks it is awful. Marco said that in general he knows where his problem of writing is and gave this example,

“...oh the teacher says I lack details ...I should give 'more details'...if you ask me what is written here (points to the evaluation-scale-form) I don't remember actually except 'lacking of detail' because this feedback has been repeated more than once.”

In sum, our participants agree that feedback helps but disagree in the amount of feedback. Nazim and Marco do not like a lot, and Nazim asks for specific feedback. It would be interesting to look further in the aspect of the amount of feedback being or not related to neophyte academic writers that have to struggle harder with learning to write academically.

Understanding written feedback

In order to use written feedback students must be able to make sense of the feedback provided by the teacher. As pointed out by Williams, “teacher comments on content are of little use if students do not know what they mean or how to use them productively to improve their skills as writers”

(2003, n.p.). Furthermore, research indicates that written feedback is often misunderstood and misinterpreted even by L1 students (Hyland, 1998). For ESL learners, the interpretation of feedback may pose several problems ranging from not being able to read the handwriting of the teacher to being unable to comprehend the vocabulary and expressions used by the teacher in the feedback.

Our respondents differ in their ability to understand the teacher's written feedback. While none of them have any problem in deciphering their teacher's handwriting some of them found their teacher's comments unclear at times. They also differ in how they respond to incomprehensible or unclear written comments.

Nazim says that sometimes it is not clear to him from the feedback what exactly is wrong. He says *"...she gives ... more than specifics so I would be confused how could I fix my writing. So that's why sometimes I would be confused between how to improve or how... to make the teacher like...like my writing?"* Nazim seems to be indicating that he is confused by feedback that is too general and not specific enough to point out his exact mistakes. He raises this issue of specific feedback several times in the interview. There is a certain irony in this since he points out that the most common comment he gets from the teacher is "to be specific" while he himself feels that the teacher's comments are sometimes not specific enough. Marco also indicates that although he sometimes has problems in exactly figuring out the teacher's comments, most of the times the feedback is clear.

Mariyam says that the feedback she gets in the present course is clear to her. She says, *"Umm..well mostly in this course everything I understand. Because she wrote it in the paper, the evaluation and she write it in my paper..my writing"*. She mentions, however, that in her earlier course she did have problems with understanding the teacher's comments and reading the teacher's handwriting. Like Maryam, Xiao has few problems in understanding the written comments of the teacher. However, she does point out that often she questions herself on whether the teacher in some instances really means what she says. Xiao says

"...sometimes when teacher says 'very good job', 'good job', or 'excellent' to everyone... so that I'm confused... when teacher says 'I am very good' is that true or just ...make me feel better... I can't understand that."

This comment by Xiao indicates the importance a single comment may have on learners who are serious about feedback, and highlights the potential for confusion which can arise from a seemingly well intentioned and simple comment made by a teacher. In pointing out the dangers of praise, Hyland & Hyland (2001) point out that many students view praise as merely mitigation

devices and often question the sincerity of the comment. They suggest that such positive comments “may need to be specific rather than formulaic and closely linked to actual text features rather than general praise” (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, p. 208).

The participants were also questioned about how they responded to feedback which is unclear to them. None of the participants turned to their peers for assistance in clarifying unclear comments. This could be related to the fact that, as we discovered later on in the interview, peer feedback played a very little role in their learning process in the specific course. Nevertheless, they did turn to their teachers in varying degrees in order to clarify unclear comments. Nazim appears to be the most reluctant to approach the teacher to clarify written feedback. He says that, “*the teacher would feel like little bit ashamed that the student didn’t understand her feedback. So I try to figure it out by myself and I would try to improve it*”. We find this comment interesting because Nazim seems to be acknowledging that the failure on his part to not understand the comment is not simply because of his own inadequacy. He sees the teacher to have failed in providing good feedback, but does not want to make her feel bad by confronting her with it.

Marco says that whether he seeks the teacher for clarification depends on the feedback. He admits that he doesn’t always go to the teacher for clarification, especially if he did well in the paper. Marco has a logical explanation,

“...it depends on when actually we have been given the results. Okay, I say I don’t want to discuss if this is the result, okay why did I get that? I think I deserve more than this... I go and see her ...is seeing from other angle, different angles, yeah is seeing from another angle this is what I know.”

Xiao also tries to figure out much of the doubtful comments for herself. In describing what she does she says, “*...when I really really want to understand clearly I go to dictionary to check every word... check everything, I want to know the real meaning of everything...*” She goes to see the teacher sometimes but it must be a worthwhile reason. According to Maryam she almost always goes to see the teacher when the feedback is not clear for her. She does point out that most of the time the teacher’s comments are clear to her, but nevertheless she goes to see the teacher after the receipt of each marked writing assignment. When asked if she met the teacher each time, she replies, “*Umm..in writing..in the writing assignment..yeah. almost every time*”.

Our participants will go to see the teacher for a worthwhile reason. However, unclear or misunderstood written feedback can at this early stage

be seen as students' inability to separate written feedback received on their assignments from the score; and since they cannot change the score they may decide not to take action or use feedback for their benefit. The power of the grade is in fact so evident that during our interviews and the follow up conversation with participants we, the interviewers, had to be very explicit while questioning about preferences of feedback, written, oral, comments, marginalia, and commentaries.

For Xiao there is nothing more important than the score, the final score on an essay or the score at the end of the semester. She is precise, "...[if] *I can have time to read only one thing I will read the score and I count... how many more points... how many I need ...for the final.*" Her alertness that the score should not be the most important has her to add,

"I know it is too stupid...why I care too much about the score? But I really count it ...quickly ...yeah and really ...if I got left two minutes for the for the final percent writing, so how much can I get in this part?"

When talking about clarify written comments, our participants often talked about going to the teacher if they felt their score was not justified and, as mentioned before, may decide to do nothing about the comments if the score cannot be changed. All four participants seemed to have this attitude and Maryam speaks for all of them when she says, "*Sometimes like I don't like my mark, but from her feedback I can't say anything because it's so logical and I can't do anything*". There seems to be an indication here that Maryam, along with the other participants, perceive at least some of the feedback to be a justification of the score, although this may not have been the intention of the teacher.

Feedback on grammar

Error correction regarding grammar has remained a controversial issue in language teaching. There are differing views in literature regarding the benefits of grammar correction on language learners (Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1996, 1999). However, most researchers agree that teachers often correct grammar and that students themselves want their grammar to be corrected by the teacher (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). This does not of course put the debate to the rest. In a recent exhaustive review of the literature on grammar correction, Ferris (2004) concludes that the jury is still out on the issue.

According to our participants they receive very little grammar correction feedback in their writing assignments. This seems consistent with the philosophy of Sustained CBI where the focus is more on content than on form. This does not, however, mean that mistakes of form go unchecked. Rather they do not receive as much importance as the content, organization,

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coherence, and cohesion of the written work. The lack of focus on grammar correction prompts Xiao to say, “*I think for Carleton the teacher not very care about the grammar*”.

Surprisingly, our participants do not think grammar feedback to be necessary or really important. While Nazim believes that grammar correction is helpful, he believes that excessive emphasis on grammar might hinder developing the overall communicative ability of the learner, a finding pointed out by Hyland (1998). Nazim says,

“...a lot of feedback about the grammar...the student would feel that he should be more ...more into grammar and then the student would ... focus more on grammar and he wouldn't focus more on the writing”

In terms of grammar correction, Nazim stresses the specificity of the mistake and an exposition of the correct form. Maryam also shares Nazim's feelings pointing out that in language classes she had had before coming to Carleton, feedback had almost always been grammar correction.

For Xiao, though she doesn't know the reason, grammar has always been a ‘*shocking*’ and ‘*uncomfortable*’ aspect of language. Of course Xiao endorses that grammar is a ‘*good way*’ if the learner cannot avail of the opportunity ‘*to go into the language environment*’ which she believes to be the best way to study the language. However, she is happy that at Carleton her teachers do not bother correcting the grammatical mistakes but emphasize organization of ideas and content. She feels her grammar skills are weak and says:

“Every time I write I hope the teacher does not pay attention to grammar. It will affect the score. In the past I lose marks in grammar... English seems to have more grammar rules than Chinese, for example “a” and “the” ... the tenses... I don't feel free because of this ...so I do not want the teacher to pay attention... the mark...it is impossible to pass grammar.”

Once more, the sweeping effect of the score appears to govern the answer in Xiao's case. She does not want the teacher to correct the grammar because she will lose marks.

Marco considers his grammar to be pretty good and the 1500 course concentrates well in content and organization of ideas and he likes this approach. Organization of ideas is what he wants to improve. He says “*...the person, the reader ... in my head okay, [if] I am confused that makes the organization confused more work in the organization you see*”. Format

and form are not an area of problem for Marco and he explains,

“...because the introduction has to bring this person (the reader) into this theme to make him think of this topic being discuss ... not throwing him in, I am preparing him for discussion in my introduction okay then my arguments my supporting ideas uh the examples the body and at the end the conclusions what I conclude from all this things ...what is my opinion sometimes at the end it makes sense.”

Our participants' tendency to not regard grammar correction as important goes against the grain of studies which indicate that students do indeed want grammar feedback. (cf. Ferris, 1995; Hedgecock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Radeki & Swales, 1988). It is possible that the participants' belief in content over form may be shaped, in part, by the context within which they study. As they point out, they receive little feedback on grammar and they perceive that their teacher puts more emphasis on form than on grammar. It is possible therefore, that their beliefs may be influenced by the pedagogy adopted by the teacher. Truscott (1999) points out that it is teachers who reinforce student beliefs in error correction, and if the teachers adopt a “correction free approach” it would change students' attitude and beliefs. This could explain the responses of our participants.

Opinions about peer feedback

Evidence from investigation in the field illustrate that some teachers expect students to trade written feedback amongst themselves, (Saito, 1994) as a practice in the writing classroom to work well with upper intermediate and advanced ESL. As Paulus (1999) states, “Peer review is now commonplace as one part of the feedback and revision process of writing classes” (p.267). Nevertheless, like most aspects of feedback, whether or not to use peer feedback as part of the pedagogy is surrounded in controversy. We explored the participants' beliefs about peer feedback and whether they used peer feedback to improve their writing.

All four participants had the general belief that peer feedback could be helpful but noted that they don't use peer feedback nor do they share the teachers' comments with their peers. Again this could be mainly because of the structure of the course which appears to focus more on individual writing in small but numerous quantities. Unlike the more common process writing oriented classes, peer feedback appears not to be an inherent part in the participants' language class. Maryam says,

“Yeah. In school I used to this. But here in university, like

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I don't know. But in school, yeah, I used to tell my friend to read it again and ..er.if there's something wrong with it".

There was one occasion during the class observation period when we noticed an opportunity for peer feedback. Maryam remembered this instance while mentioning that she did have peer feedback in the earlier course and not in the present course.

"In 1300, yes. But in this one... like we did this in the presentation. She told us to present like make three..a group with three people and present for each other and write some feedback. Yeah, it was helpful ."

Maryam remembers from past experience that peer feedback is helpful saying that, *"Yeah. Because you know like when you write, you can't see your mistakes, like somebody read it again"*.

Maryam's words sum up the feelings of the others who also feel that peer feedback may be helpful in helping them improve their writing. However, Nazim and Maarco show some reservation. Nazim is rather businesslike in his attitude in sharing feedback with his classmates; he thinks that if the peer sitting next to him does not volunteer his feedback there is hardly any point exchanging the feedback with him. He reveals his point of view *"if he doesn't show me his feedback why should I show him my feedback..."* Marco was not sure if he would like peers to read what he wrote, and said that he sometimes has no time to read his own draft.

None of our participants said they shared the teachers' comments with peers or asked a peer for clarification if a teacher's comment was unclear. However, they all share their score on the paper. Xiao thinks that sharing and comparing the score is a 'stupid idea' but says that she does it as well. *"Yah I talk about that, usually we talk about marks, about [each] others marks and compare."* Xiao never shares her teacher's marginalia. She says, *"I think it is because of the feedback cannot be compared but a score can compare, can be compared."* Like Xiao, Maryam shares the grade with her peers most of the time, but does not share or discuss written comments. Marco is pretty competitive and feels the urge to check feedback when any of his peers outperforms him. He uses it as a device for self-criticism for not being as serious as the peer who has done (scored) better than him.

It is interesting to note that while they do share their grades they do not discuss why they might have gotten the grade they did or the strategies they used in writing to achieve a good grade. Maryam was asked precisely the question whether she asked about the strategies used by a peer who had scored better than her and she replied,

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“...sometimes, if I want to improve my research, but like usually in these things we don't have a second chance... Like, maybe it's helpful for later, but I don't know why, like I never did it”.

It might be a difficult area for students to share expertise with peers due to the frequent writing in the course and because they are learning how to write academic papers and not so sure of themselves or the learning that is happening for them.

It appears that our participants have a sense that peer feedback can be a helpful means of improving their writing. However, they do not consider it to be more important than teacher feedback. Similar findings were made by Jacobs et.al. (1998) who, having distributed a questionnaire to 121 ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, found that 93% preferred to have peer feedback as one form of feedback in their writing. Zhang (1995, 1999) argues that while L1 studies indicate that peer feedback has an “inherent affective advantage over teacher feedback” (1999, p.324) the same is not true for ESL classrooms. Zhang (1999) states that peer feedback may have benefits but does not deserve a preeminent role over teacher feedback in ESL classrooms and supports Jacobs et.al. (1998) in advocating a “judicious use of a combination of feedback” (p. 325).

Feelings about positive and negative feedback

The participants of this study have mixed feelings about positive and negative feedback. Positive feedback delights Xiao though she looks forward to some but few negative feedback that point to weaknesses she thinks to have in grammar. She thinks of herself as a good writer in Chinese and doing well in English. Xiao is of the opinion that negative feedback might sometimes shatter students' confidence. Two participants used the term “demoralizing”, and negative feedback might not work as a driving force behind students' improvement in learning anything not only how to write better. Marco finds it difficult to come to terms with negative feedback while positive feedback makes him feel ‘great’. For Marco the memory of positive feedback in a preceding assignment makes writing a pleasure for the next one whereas negative feedback does cast a haunting effect, which interferes with the natural flow of his writing. Nazim's belief is in tune with Xiao as to the two kinds of feedback. He is for a balanced blend of negative and positive feedback; excessive of one kind alone does a disservice for the improvement in learning. Negative feedback does not depress Maryam as she respects teachers' opinion as to her weaknesses. A bit like Marco, the type of feedback impacts her performance on the subsequent paper.

Xiao had received a lot of positive feedback on her mid-term exam and that was paramount. Xiao's teacher wrote the following summary

comment on her mid-term assignment “Overall your analysis is well developed and well organized” and when asked “What does it mean for you?”, she says “*means great... I work hard for organize I want to organize it well uh ...I tried to organize it and the teacher find it I am very happy to see.*” Xiao was overwhelmed with her teacher noticing she “*had worked hard on the organization.*”

On negative feedback, Xiao does not mind if it is little. What was interesting to hear from Xiao is that she *knew* about her weakness as she repeated often “*I know it before... I really write too much... mmm not very sad to hear that... this is a good teacher, yeah good teacher.*” When asked why she thought her teacher was good, Xiao replies, “*yes...so yea she know it my weakness...*” The short dialogue about negative feedback with Xiao revealed an important point: she knows about her weaknesses and thinks that the teacher is good if she points out that weakness. In a way we can presuppose that positive feedback is a teacher recognizing the part of writing the students’ struggles with and be positive in commenting; likewise negative feedback means the teacher agrees with what the student knows is her weakness. In short it was clear that Xiao was thrilled to realize her teacher understanding her as a writer who works hard to get the job done and done well. It seems that Xiao’s close scrutiny to how the teacher “marks” guides her to learn how to write.

Marco said he feels “stressed” about negative feedback. In his words when he reads negative feedback he feels “*Oh come on it wasn’t that awful ...my writing I don’t deserve that*”. In spite of the intrinsic desire for positive feedback Marco said that it is especially the negative feedback which he remembers in his next assignment and adds “*... the very negative, if he said awful things about my writing here okay and you did very bad in grammar – I would remember that very well in each sentence I am writing.*” If he would remember the positive one he says “*I’ll be big headed, more confident yeah, I would write with more pleasure more beautiful intelligent words and sentences ... feel free.*”

For Nazim, negative feedback is a learning experience. He says that he would prefer both negative and positive feedback but is quick to add, “*... but depends on the comment, how negative it is*”. Regarding negative comments, he says, “*...if you get negative comments you would feel you are not doing anything, why should I take that course if I am not improving, right*”. Similarly, about positive feedback, Nazim says, “*He wouldn’t like if she gave him positive always positive ..umm. comments he would think his writing is..is good..like why should I like..why should I change my writing, right*”. Thus for Nazim, a fair share of both negative and positive feedback are necessary to improve learners’ writing.

Maryam states that she feels happy when she gets positive comments from the teacher and that puts her in a good mood to write the

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next assignment. With regard to negative feedback, Maryam says that she knows her limitations and respects the teacher's opinion. However, she points out that negative feedback affects her performance on a subsequent paper. She says,

You have to work hard but, still like for me sometimes I feel specially if I work hard at something and I get bad mark, it's something I can't control it but umm..I feel down and if I feel..like I spent a lot of time and I got this mark and I'm wasting my time

As has been observed in other instances, feedback seems to be closely connected with the score for our participants and Maryam associates a low mark with negative feedback.

Our participants value positive feedback over negative feedback. Hyland (1998) points out that writing is an intensive personal activity and feedback can adversely affect students' motivation and confidence in themselves as writers. Hyland (1998) referring to Daiker (1989) states that, "adverse response of any kind may encourage high writing apprehension and lock a student into a cycle of failure, lack of motivation and further failure" suggesting that positive reinforcement can help learners gain confidence. One of the students in Hyland's (1998) study had asked for grammar correction from her teacher and for it was the feedback she "loved most." However, the student expected praise for her grammar as well. No positive comments on her grammatical ability jeopardized the student's confidence together with her ability to write.

On the other hand positive reinforcement can also create insecurity, especially if the students feel that the comments are insincere. Hyland & Hyland (2001) warn us that we should be careful about "sugaring the pill" of criticism with praise as it could often lead to miscommunication and misinterpretation. A common problem with positive feedback or praise is that it is not text specific or focused on certain aspects of the text. Thus students often feel that teachers write such comments as mitigation devices which do not really mean anything and are often unhelpful (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Xiao highlights this point in our study when talking about understanding feedback. She says, "*when teacher says 'I am very good' is that true or just ...make me feel better... I can't understand that*".

The issue of negative and positive feedback appears to be fraught with complexities. Since the criticism and praise students receive on their writing are inherently tied to their motivation and, in turn, their success as writers, it appears essential for teachers to strike the right balance between the two. This is probably easier said than done, and requires that teachers try

and understand the individual nature of students.

Oral vs. written feedback and location of feedback

While our main concern was written feedback, we decided to probe a little about oral feedback and compare the two types of feedback with regard to our participants. Since students were getting written feedback in three different ways, as marginalia, as comments at the end of a written assignment, and on a separate sheet, we also explored the preferences of the students for these three types of feedback.

All participants appeared to prefer oral feedback to written feedback. This is perhaps related to the fact that oral feedback allows for immediate clarification of confusing or misunderstood feedback. Xiao puts it simply when she says, *“If the teachers meet me and tell me what to do...I understand.”* Maryam takes it a step further by seeing the teacher each time she receives a marked piece of writing. She says, *“You are not gonna be able to know your mistakes unless you talk to her”*. When pressed with the point that the teacher had provided written comments for her, she says finally, *“But she didn’t write how can I improve it in a way, like, spend more time or read more resources, you know”*. Earlier comments Maryam made regarding her visits to the teacher after the receipt of each marked piece of writing indicates that conferencing with the teacher is an essential component of feedback for her

Nazim and Marco are also in agreement with Xiao and Maryam in preferring oral feedback or conferencing with the teacher. Marco talks about the need for teachers to sit down with students, and poses a question,

“Is there a moment that students and teachers sit and discuss? The two parts[student and teachers] have something in this she could sit with each student and discuss, or in class together, or make reference to readings that would help the students”.

However, Marco says that sometimes, oral feedback results in more information than he can handle. According to him, *“...they answer my question and more than I’m expecting him and so I go oh yes yes yes when I’m not even concentrating anymore”*.

For all participants in the study, ‘caring’ shown by a teacher seems to be a major characteristic associated with good feedback. In discussing about teachers who give good feedback, Xiao says, *“Some people really care...both here and in my native country.”* She adds to this by saying

“...because for the student the most important thing is

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that the teacher cares about you. That is really important for learning...say now my teacher R...she wrote many things on our paper so that I will know she really cares about us...so I want to do better in my class. Sometimes the teacher she is more than mine... that ... really a good feeling...”.

In talking about a teacher who had given him good feedback, Nazim says, “*the teacher treats you as her son, as one of her kids*”. His recollection of this teacher is that, “*she always used to tell me ... if you want any help like call me, give me, send me the paper.umm..I would look over it, would help you*”.

Williams (2003) cites Brender (1998) and Fregeau (1999) in saying that written feedback is more effective when coupled with student-teacher conferencing. Student-teacher conferencing allows students to clear misunderstandings regarding feedback and deal with specific problems. Our participants’ preference for conferencing with the teacher is similar to findings of Brender (1998) and Fregeau (1999) (cited in Williams, 2003) who state that students prefer conferencing and find it more effective than written comments.

Marco prefers his feedback to be short and specific, a preference indicated by the other participants as well. The term specific occurred often in the interviews with a general preference for marginalia rather than comments at the end of the paper. With regard to the location of feedback, Xiao answers bluntly, “*it is at the margin—where I make the mistake—very specific*” although she points out that the general comments, “*build[s] a picture*” in her mind. Nazim sums up the views of all participants by expressing that marginalia and comments at the end of the paper are both useful, but serve different purposes in that marginalia are more specific and the comments at the end are more general. These views of our participants are in agreement with the findings of Ferris & Hedgecock (1998) who suggest that marginal commentary, since it appears right next to the place that requires revision, reduces confusion as to what the comment refers to. Marginalia also has immediacy and refers to a specific error in the text. At the same time Ferris & Hedgecock (1998) suggest that end commentary can be beneficial as well, being summative and focusing on rhetorical issues. As Goldstein (2004) states,

Students need to know exactly where textual problems as well as textual effectiveness are located; additionally, they need summative commentary from which they can extrapolate and learn not just for the current draft but also for future writing. (p. 75)

It follows that, with a preference for marginalia, our participants felt strongly that feedback was more useful on the actual written assignment than on a separate sheet. Marco and Nazim had negative feelings towards separate sheets with feedback with Marco pointing out that the separate sheet of feedback which they received (see Appendix 2) contained too much information. Nazim is adamant that feedback should be on the written work of the student and not on a separate sheet. Maryam and Xiao are of the opinion that a separate sheet of feedback is useful at times with Xiao pointing out that, *“I like it...It is a huge job though...time consuming”*. Maryam thinks that the separate sheet of feedback or evaluation scale form they receive from the teacher (see Appendix 2) is not a bad idea. She says, *“The one with the marks [evaluation scale form] makes the student read more about the feedback. Like the marks beside it”*. The issue of specificity was again of concern, and Maryam says, *“...if she’s gonna write on her separate paper it’s general. On my paper it’s more specific and like I know where my mistake is”*.

It is important for comments made by the teacher to be specific and to point to a certain error or revision in the students’ texts. Ferris et.al. (1997), referring to Bates et. al. (1993), Sommers (1982) and Zamel (1985), suggest that teachers should provide text-specific commentary instead of “vague generalizations which demonstrate little teacher involvement with the individual student or his/her paper” (p. 16). Goldstein (2004), states that the “common consensus is that commentary should be specific”(p. 75). Goldstein says

“... in most cases a comment such as “you need more development here” is not text-specific, while a comment such as “ here, where you discuss why you feel you can’t live in a city because of bad experiences in cities, I would like to know details of what happened in these experiences and how these events influenced your decision that city living is not for you.” is text-specific. Text-specific comments serve to show exactly what difficulties the reader is having with the text and where; they are also motivating as they show the reader actively engaged with the writer’s text.” (2004, p. 75-76).

What do students do with written feedback

We aimed to explore what students actually do with the feedback they receive; whether they remember to use the feedback in the next writing assignment, and if so, how much they can remember. The question overlaps with answers to our previous question of understanding or not written

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feedback on assignments. Answers draw out similar responses from our interviewees.

Nazim was asked an ethnographic ‘distribution check’ ¹(Agar, 1980) question:

Interviewer: *Do you think students actually use the feedback they get in the papers?*

Nazim: *No*

Interviewer: *Do you use it?*

Nazim: *Sometimes. Some times. It depends. Like... if it was specific and if I had like many mistakes in my writing, of course I would use it. But, like if I did well, like I get over 20 over 25, it's a good mark, so why should I look at my feedback?*

For Marco written feedback seems to be the score on the evaluation scale form and the written feedback received tells of why he got such result. Again, there is no reason to discuss results (*score*). The question is put in another way.

Interviewer: *“... you said something about ... I am going to make you this question again, what do you usually do with the written feedback. Earlier you said ...that you look at it and forget it... correct me if I am wrong.”*

Marco: *“Yah, specially the writing feedback like I said if it is important it is a lot of things, important things relay on it, I might go and check it more than once.”*

Interviewer: *Oh I see, and before you go for your next writing assignment, would you check previous feedback? ...or remember it...?*

Marco: *“Well we have many assignments...I did not go and check it.”*

Interviewer: *Yah we usually memorize things and we go on into the next writing piece...*

Marco: *I like... I forgot... that I had feedback and ...*

However, a week later during our follow up conversation, Marco remembered about our previous recorded interview that the teacher had underlined ‘lacking details’ on the evaluation scale form. We had this short dialogue.

¹ In ethnographic research a quantifier questions draws on participants opinion of others (students) behavior.

Interviewer: *So, you remember that...lack of details.*

Marco: *Yes, yes I remember that she said something about that before.*

Interviewer: *In this in-class assignment can you tell me where you lack details?*

Marco: *No, can you?*

Interviewer: *I read it but no, I do not know where detail is lacking.*

Interviewer: *Well, tell me do you talk to your teacher in/outside the classroom about this? About this feedback, you have received.*

Marco: *Well it depends on the feedback itself... I feel it's not right, sort of unfair and there's this big gap... unfair... negatively, big big ... unfair I should get a lot better than this...*

Marco like Nazim has the opinion that very few students look at feedback. As a matter of fact, when Marco was probed to consider whether the feedback on the evaluation scale form helps him to learn to write, he blames his personality. The 'lacking detail' feedback Marco got on the evaluation scale form is a problem he has for a long time in writing. When asked if the evaluation scale form helps him, here is what he says

“... for me?... I don't think so, maybe it is something with my personality, I am looking at this (mid-term evaluation scale) ...so for another student it might do something ...but what can I do? ...Reading everything and at the end ... I forget, ...because it confuses me much, a negative thing but...”

Xiao, who likes a lot of feedback, reveals difficulties to remember and says,

“Some special feedback I can remember and even remember clearly. I remember ...second grade in the middle school, the teacher gave me a paper ... she wrote me a note, very personal, and she told me to read an author ...and I keep it until now.”

Xiao was fourteen years old when she received this teacher's written feedback in China and says *“This teacher cares about me.”* For her the evaluation scale form feedback and her teachers at course 1500 does the following:

“...comments build me a big picture...what I need, and

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next time I will work on this part, in fact this time I know what I need to do, but last time's feedback I forgot...it usually happens, I can't remember everything."

Xiao blames her memory; in several occasions she said "...I cannot remember everything...my memory is bad." With regard to using feedback, Maryam is the most clued-up regard of what to do with feedback. She always reads through the teacher's comments when revising. Although she indicates that she uses the feedback, sometimes this appears to be related to the type of assignments and the scope available for incorporating feedback into future writing. In the 1300 course, which she followed the previous term, she went through a process approach of writing and she thinks it was very helpful in improving her writing. She says,

"In the intensive and last term my teacher usually took first draft and write comments and took the second draft and give feedback and we have to write the final one".

However, in the present course, although there are a lot of writing assignments, they do not follow a process approach and hence the teacher gets to see only the final paper and provides feedback only on the final version. She does note that some of the assignments do allow the revision process. For example, an oral presentation that she had to do was preceded by the handing in of a proposal, which received feedback from the teacher. Referring to the use of feedback, Maryam says,

"I'll do that with my proposal, because I have to do my presentation in this one so I have to rewrite everything again because in the theories she told me there is no enough details so I have to find some resources and find some information".

In this instance, there seems to be clear and specific understanding of what she needed to do in order to improve her presentation. Although, each of her writing assignments may be different from one another in terms of content, structure and organization, she says that she tries to use the comments received in one paper when she writes a subsequent paper. When asked whether she remembers the feedback when she is writing a subsequent paper, she says that she often brings along her earlier paper and looks at the feedback. It is interesting to note that she believes she knows what her problem is, which she puts down to "lack of detail" in writing. What is more interesting is that she believes it is a difficult problem to overcome, regardless of the feedback she receives, and says, "...usually, even in my

own language I have the same problem”.

Research shows that even when students do understand a comment, they may have difficulty figuring out a strategy for revising (Cohen, 1991; Conrad & Goldstein, 1999). Our study’s participants point out that the class writes very often, and when students get the assignment back, another assignment is already being written or has already been written. Other studies (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 1997) point to students instability in terms of how successfully they are able to use the teacher’s feedback to revise as well as students differing in terms of how open they actually are to revising with their teachers’ feedback (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Radecki & Swales, 1988). An illuminating finding over this aspect of what students do with feedback was found in Saito’s (1994) study which states that teacher’s expectations may be reflected in the students’ attitude when handling feedback on their own and in their future writing assignments.

Conclusion & pedagogical implications

While our participants agree that feedback is helpful to learning, they appear to differ in certain aspects regarding their preference for and attitudes towards feedback and its various forms. The sample is too small to make any general judgments; however, it does point towards differences in individual learners with regard to feedback, a finding echoed in previous studies (Hyland, 1998; Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990; Conrad & Goldstein, 1999). As Hyland (1998) notes, providing feedback which meets the expectations of all students is extremely difficult since students have different perceptions of feedback. Goldstein (2004) states that, “the process of reading student writing and providing helpful commentary is a complex process and should not be simplified” (p. 78). Nevertheless, “there is no one-size-fits-all form of teacher commentary” (Ferris et. al., 1997).

One way to improve teacher feedback and make our comments more meaningful to learners is to try and understand the perceptions, beliefs and expectations of the students. Hyland (1998) states that teachers already account for the individuality of students when giving feedback. Teachers have a notion of student ability and performance and vary the amount and type of feedback which they give to individual students (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). If teachers can also account for the individual preferences and expectations about feedback while doing this, the outcome may have beneficial results. The task is not to give in to student beliefs and give up on our beliefs. Rather we need to know, understand and respect student expectations and beliefs and try to accommodate them into our pedagogical practices. Goldstein (2004) suggests that “combining the students’ views and our views allows for open discussion of expectations and

exploration of where there is a mismatch between these views” (p. 70). Thus we can find middle ground where teachers account for the students’ needs and become more “caring” as expected by our participants.

Our study also indicates a general preference of the participants for student-teacher conferences, a major avenue for teachers to find about student expectations and resolve misunderstandings and confusion. According to Hyland (1998), teachers should devote some time to conferencing with individual students on feedback issues. A first step, as suggested by Goldstein (2004), is to explain to the students “what we do and why ... to avoid a mismatch between what we do and what students expect” (p. 70). Conferencing allows learners to get the “specific” feedback which they demand and allows students to clarify the teacher’s comments. As Xiao in our study exemplifies, “...*may be if the teacher marks face to face is better...is a good way...the teacher maybe talks to the student and mark some very most important part...I think that is useful*”. Studies by Brender (1998) and Fregeau (1999) also show that written feedback is more effective in conjunction with student-teacher conferencing (cited in Williams, 2003).

The study also indicates that students sometimes misunderstand teachers’ comments and often, even when they understand, they do not know what to do about it. Maryam says that she knows that her problem is often ‘a lack of detail’ and she has been receiving this feedback for around four years. The other three participants have similar problems as well, indicating that the more serious issue may not be understanding feedback, but what to do with it. Teachers may therefore need to explicitly discuss the written comments with students. As Goldstein (2004) states

discussion of why we comment in the ways that we do should then lead to explicit examinations of actual comments, both in terms of what they mean and in terms of what types of revision(s) the comments suggest. (p. 70).

Instead of pointing out mistakes it may be helpful for teachers to state the revision strategies required to improve the writing. According to Goldstein (2004) there is convincing evidence that comments which include revision strategies are particularly helpful to students. If students keep on making the same mistakes after repeated feedback, it may not be a bad idea to take class time to discuss feedback and explicitly teach revision strategies, including the interpretation of the teacher’s comments.

A major issue with regard to feedback appears to be the score or the grade. All our participants seem to be concerned with the score and connected feedback strongly to the score. The score becomes the guiding beam of the lighthouse which illuminates the way for them as they struggle

to make sense of academic writing. In fact, with regard to feedback, the score or grade may be the only main concern that learners have in common (Freedman, 1987, cited in Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). In the case of our participants, with almost all their written work contributing towards the final grade, the score was a major concern. When talking about feedback they often talked about fairness and justification in terms of the score. They felt that, in instances, the feedback was a justification of the score. As Maryam says, ““*Sometimes like I don't like my mark, but from her feedback I can't say anything because it's so logical and I can't do anything*””. Since our participants get feedback on the final piece of work, they do not often bother to read the feedback because they cannot change their score. Hence the very use of feedback is intricately tied to the score. It is interesting to note here, that based on the philosophy of the course, the teacher's intention is that the feedback given in one assignment can be incorporated into the next one. Each assignment is a segment in the sequence of a broader ongoing project. It appears that some of the students fail to see this link in their concern of and importance given to the score of each assignment.

Cohen & Cavlcanti (1990) also found that the score played a major role in the handling of feedback by students. Many students often believe their teachers to be judges of their work rather than interested readers (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). Hence, the score is the teacher's judgement, and the feedback becomes a justification of the judgement rather than an attempt to assist the students in improving their writing. When each assignment becomes an “isolated miniature test” (Leki, 1990) there is very little opportunity for feedback to be perceived as being useful by students. Most teachers are not comfortable in the role of evaluators, and yet as Leki (1990) notes, “this issue is inescapable for most of us and colors all other aspects of responding appropriately and effectively to student writing”. (p. 66). The importance is again on educating the students on feedback and explaining the role of teacher as both collaborator and evaluator.

Finally we have to agree with Conrad & Goldstein (1999) that one of the most important findings of our study is our personal growth as language teachers through our heightened understanding of feedback. We hope to employ these findings in our future endeavours as writing teachers and provide better feedback to our students. We join Conrad & Goldstein (1999) in encouraging teachers “to conduct their own classroom research by working with a fellow writing teacher, collecting data, analyzing it, and learning”.(p. 175). Each learning situation is different and it is through the investigation of our own classrooms and by reflecting on our own pedagogical practices that we can hope to find solutions which are workable in our classrooms.

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