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Vietnamese EFL students' perception and preferences for teachers' written feedback

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ABSTRACT : In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the role of teachers' written feedback (TWF) in the EFL writing class as well as the factors determining the effectiveness of TWF. This study examined Vietnamese EFL university students' perceptions toward and preferences for TWF as well the problems they encounter when dealing with TWF. A Likert scale questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 84 English major students at a university in Vietnam. The analysis indicated that the majority of participants find TWF helpful and crucial for the development of their writing skill. Comprehensive correction appeared to be more favorable to the students as they expected the feedback to mark all their errors. It is also reported that although the students prefer to receive indirect feedback, they face several difficulties when processing TWF and need additional clues or guidance from their teachers.
KEYWORDS : *EFL learners, writing, teachers' written feedback, perceptions, preferences*

I.INTRODUCTION

Writing has been considered one of the most challenging skills for EFL students to master (Salma, 2015). In fact, writing can be described as a productive process in which the students have to simultaneously handle several elements such as vocabulary, grammar, organization, and mechanic to successfully convey their ideas to the readers. Problems can arise from any of these aspects and at any stage of the writing process. A few can be recognized and corrected by students. Others, unfortunately, can hardly be solved without outside intervention. Unlike the receptive skills, writing skill can only be developed through a process of producing writing products, making mistakes, and correcting them. Some researchers claim that feedback is fundamental element that not only helps students solve their problems in writing but also increase their engagement and motivation to write more and better (Nicol, 2010; Shepard et al., 2018). Therefore, teaching writing is a difficult task for teachers as they are expected to not only focus on teaching writing strategies but also provide students with helpful feedback.

Although giving and receiving feedback, especially written feedback, are common tasks in almost every EFL writing classroom, it seems that the actual effectiveness of this activity have not received adequate consideration from both teachers and learners. Studies have also found that there are certain mismatch between teachers' and learners' perceptions and preferences regarding teachers' error feedback practices (Norouzian & Farahani, 2012; Zhan, 2016). While the teachers are confused in determining when and how (much) they should correct their students, the learners themselves often have problems in dealing with teachers' feedback. These problems are even more noticeable in the EFL context where many low-proficiency students find grappling with teacher's feedback to be no less difficult than perform a writing task. Correcting student errors and providing feedback is advised to be done flexibly across various circumstances rather than follow a rigid, immutable procedure (Ellis, 2010). EFL writing teachers are then suggested to take factors such as students' perceptions and preferences into account, so that their feedback could be more effective and constructive.

Unfortunately, research in this area is still relatively sparse and several EFL teachers are in shortage of insightful references on this issue. Thus the teachers mainly rely on personal experience and assumption, which can be very different from students' needs and expectations, to determine the way they respond to students' writing. Accordingly, the present study is designed to investigate the Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions of their teachers' written feedback (TWF) and suggest some educational implications. More specifically, this paper aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are EFL students' perceptions of their teachers' written feedback?
2. What are EFL students' problems in dealing with their teachers' written feedback?
3. What are EFL students' preferences for their teachers' written feedback?

II.LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of feedback

There have been different views on the nature of feedback and providing feedback. According to Kepner (1991), feedback refers to "any procedure used to inform a learner whether an instructional response is right or wrong" (p.308). Asiri (1997), on the other hand, argued that creativity is an inseparable characteristic of writing and feedback should not be treated as a way to tell a writer whether his writing is accurate or not. In a more general perspective, Keh (2003) defined feedback as "any input from reader to writer that provides information for revision" (p.17). This definition seems most appropriate for the present study where we focus on the way the EFL learners perceive their teachers' written feedback and make use of it in their future work.

With regard to the types of feedback used by the EFL teachers, this study focuses on direct feedback and indirect feedback, the two methods which are common in almost every writing class. According to Ellis (2009), direct feedback is the feedback provided by the teacher by directly giving students the correct form of language while indirect feedback only contains some indication of errors rather than explicit correction. The latter therefore require the students to rely on the teachers' clue, which may take the form of circle, code, underline or acronyms, to identify the error and correct it on their own. A much debated issue which attracted much attention of researchers is whether teachers' feedback should be given directly or indirectly. While some researchers insisted that direct feedback is more effective than indirect feedback (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2011), there are other studies concluding that indirect feedback would be more beneficial for students as it stimulates deeper levels of processing in students and foster long-term writing development (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Eslami, 2014).

2.2. The importance of teachers' written feedback

In the EFL context, the learners have limit access to the authentic materials and, unsurprisingly, lack sufficient exposure to the target language. The EFL students therefore easily fail to develop accurate, native-like use of English. Many of these errors are made unconsciously due to the learner's lack of knowledge and cannot be self-corrected. Teachers' written feedback is therefore essential to ensure linguistic accuracy and increase students' writing proficiency. In fact, several studies have revealed that TWF can lead to significant improvement in students' writing performance, especially when compared to those whose receive limited or no feedback from the instructors (Purnawarman, 2013; Alharbi, 2016). Some researchers even claimed that writing teachers should consider providing feedback as their responsibility for the students' benefit (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

In addition, teachers' feedback, according to Brookhart (2017), includes both cognitive and motivational factors. Specifically, it not only provides students the information they need to measure their progress and identify the next actions to take but also encourages the feeling of accomplishment and being able to control their own learning. On the other hand, students may lose learning motivation if their teachers' feedback does not meet their expectation (Ferris, 2003). Thus the EFL teachers are advised to carefully consider their students' perceptions and preferences in order to ensure the cognitive and motivational effect of their written feedback.

2.3. Related studies

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the effectiveness of teachers' written feedback as well as the EFL students' perceptions and preferences for their teachers' written feedback. Alharbi (2016), in a study investigating effect of teachers' written corrective feedback on Saudi EFL students' writing achievements, has found that TWF is a fundamental element in students' improvement which is proven through the performance of experimental group in the pre-test and post-test. The attitude questionnaire conducted in this experimental study also revealed that the students positively perceive their teachers' feedback. Specifically, TWF is reported to not only guide them on how to improve the quality of their writing, but also "makes writing more meaningful and enjoyable" (p.24). Similarly, Al-Sawalha (2016) conducted a qualitative study to examine how the EFL Jordanian students perceive their teachers' written feedback. This study revealed that TWF received positive response from the majority of the participants. Besides serving as a guide for those students to improve their writing, TWF is also reported to significantly impact their writing motivation. The happiness of receiving praise from teachers motivates the students to write better while the critical comments may lead to some frustration. These findings reflect those of Mahfoodh & Pandian (2011) who, based on the qualitative data obtained from semi–structured interview, think-aloud protocols and students' written texts, claimed that although the EFL students appreciate the usefulness of TWF, they are likely to be frustrated and express negative reactions to TWF when it is full of critical comments or incomprehensible.

To better understand the problems faced by the EFL students when dealing with TWF, Kurnia (2022) carried out a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with 10 students who have low writing proficiency. It was found that the students encounter several problems such as difficulty understanding teacher's comments or error codes, inability to make correction based on received feedback. Some students even reported that they are too shy to ask for further help or explanation from their teacher. Subsequently, the author advised EFL teachers to make their comments legible and comprehensible based on consideration of students' proficiency.

In addition, the effectiveness of TWF is also affected by the students' preferences which have received increasing attention from researchers. In a study conducted by Rahimi (2010), 82% of the participants, who were the English majors in an Iranian university, were more favorable to direct rather than indirect feedback. Their perceptions of errors were also found to be influenced by teachers' practice. In other words, the reason they had strong preference for feedback on certain types of error was because their teachers have always emphasized the importance of these linguistic aspects. In the same vein, findings of a study on EFL teachers and students' perception of error correction by Muliyah et al. (2020) indicated that the students came to be in favor of explicit feedback so that they could know what their problem exactly was. Moreover, this study called attention to an issue regarding the discrepancies between teachers and students' perception of feedback practices. For example, while the teachers hold the belief that correcting all the errors would be the most facilitative method, most of students found it overwhelming and expected to receive feedback in a selective approach with fewer comments. This also accords with our other observations, which showed that the learners want TWF to focus on their crucial errors only (Zarifi, 2017; Saragih, Madya & Saragih, 2021).

Regarding students' perceptions of TWF in Vietnamese EFL teaching context, Nguyen et al. (2021) conducted a study with 97 English-major students in a tertiary context. The authors used questionnaire and semi-structured interview to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The findings revealed that according to students, the written feedback they received from their teacher focused, in descending order, on grammatical errors, coherence and cohesion, and lexical choice mechanical errors and task response. Indirect feedback with clues was reported to be the most preferred form of feedback among participants. Significantly, there was significant mismatch between students' expectations and the linguistic features that their teachers targeted. Because the students had the "demands for feedback on higher order skills such as logical and critical thinking in idea development", TWF which "focus substantially on grammar" turned out to be not satisfactory (p.421).
Together these studies provide important insights into the role of teacher's written feedback from the perspective of both EFT students and teachers. However, they contain a variety of contrasting finding and highlight the need for more research on this topic.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

In this study, convenience sampling was used to select 84 participants who were 3rd year English major students from a university in Vietnam. All of the participants have taken several writing courses as compulsory parts of their bachelor curriculum and consequently have been familiar with receiving and processing teachers' written feedback. The students came from various backgrounds and were at different proficiency levels. All of the participants were informed that their answers would remain anonymous and would be used for research purposes only.

3.2. Instrument

A questionnaire, which was developed drawing from a review of relevant literature, was employed to collect quantitative data from the participants. The questionnaire covers different aspects consisting of the students' perceptions of teachers' written feedback (10 items), the problems they have encountered when dealing with TWF (5 items) and their preferences for TWF (13 items). All of the items in these two parts were designed using a five-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree (respectively scored from 1 to 5). The whole questionnaire had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .704, indicating acceptable reliability of the instrument.

3.3 Procedures

First, the questionnaire was designed and piloted with a group of 10 students to check its comprehensibility and whether there was any ambiguity that can prevent students from confidently giving answers. Based on their suggestions, necessary modification was implemented after this stage. Then, the questionnaire was delivered to 84 participants through Goolge form. The data collected from the questionnaire was processed by using SPSS 20.

IV.FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

4.1.1. Students' perceptions of their teachers' written feedback

The first question of the study examines how the EFL students perceive their teachers' written feedback. As shown in table 1, the results indicate that the participants have a high positive perception towards TWF.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of students' perceptions of teachers' written feedback

Students' perceptions of teachers' written feedback	Mean	Std. Deviation
TWF helps me improve the quality of my writing.	4.29	.74
TWF tells me what I did well in my writing.	4.06	.73
TWF explains what I did wrong in my writing.	4.35	.74
TWF makes me feel less embarrassed when negative comments are given.	4.13	.67
TWF guides me on how to identify and correct my errors.	4.36	.61
TWF increases my self-confidence when performing writing tasks.	4.04	.72
TWF motivates me to write more and better.	4.15	.65
TWF is less forgettable as I can access it whenever I want.	4.25	.73
TWF is unhelpful.	1.93	.89
TWF makes me feel frustrated.	2.32	.91
Valid N (listwise)		

The mean scores of all items confirming the benefits of TWF are over 4.0 while the negative statements yield significantly lower mean scores. Specifically, most participants believe TWF helps pointing out their problems (M = 4.35, SD = 0.74) as well as gives them directions to identify and correct their errors (M = 4.36; SD = 0.61). The highest agreement from the students for these two statements allows the researchers to infer that the TWF they have received were mainly corrective feedback which focused on error correction. The items related to motivational effect of TWF, though also receive positive responses from the students, get a little bit lower mean scores. The participants affirm that TWF tells them what they did well in their writing (M= 4.06; SD= 0.73), increases their self-confidence when performing writing tasks (M= 4.04; SD= 0.72) and as a result, motivates them to write more and better (M= 4.15. SD= 0.65). On the contrary, the lowest mean scores are recorded for the statements that TWF is unhelpful and frustrating (M= 1.93, SD= 0.89 and M= 2.32; SD= 0.91, respectively).

4.1.2. Students' problems in dealing with teachers' written feedback

As mentioned earlier, the present study also aims to investigate the challenges faced by the EFL students' when dealing with TWF.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of students' problems in dealing with teachers' written feedback

Students' problems in dealing with teachers' written feedback	Mean	Std. Deviation
TWF includes confusing criteria for evaluation.	3.32	1.04
TWF is too general/vague to understand.	3.65	1.06
I cannot understand the error codes/symbols used by the teachers.	3.05	1.15
I don't know how to correct the mistakes pointed out by the teachers.	3.74	1.16
I don't understand the teachers' comments because they are given in English.	2.38	1.09
Valid N (listwise)		

The data illustrated in table 2 show that the students encounter some challenges when processing their teachers' feedback. It can be seen that the mean scores of most of the items are above the average level. In particular, many students don't know how to correct the mistakes pointed out by the teachers (M= 3.74, SD= 1.16). The next problem arises when the students find TWF too vague to understand (M= 3.65; SD= 1.06). It seems that the indirect feedback from the teachers is sometimes given in too general manners (i.e underline, circle, acronym,…) and causes challenges to the students. While some other problems like getting confused of the marking criteria (M=3.32, SD= 1.04) inability to understand the error codes (M= 3.05, SD= 1.15) are faced by a number of participants, only a few students have difficulty understand teachers' English comment (M=2.38; SD=1.09). It is also noteworthy that the standard deviation values of all items in this section are over 1.0, indicating that the participants have significantly different experience and opinions regarding this aspect.

4.1.3. Students' preferences for teachers' written feedback

On the question of the EFL students' preferences for teachers' written feedback, the present study collected data from the participants about their preferences and expectations in several aspects such as feedback type, focus of feedback, amount of feedback,…etc. The results of descriptive statistics are shown in table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of students' preferences for their teachers' written feedback

Students' preferences for their teachers' written feedback?	Mean	Std. Deviation
I expect to receive both praise and criticism on my papers.	4.29	.69
Teachers should mark all errors.	3.98	1.06
Teachers should mark only crucial errors.	2.92	1.20
Teachers should indicate the error only and let me correct it by myself.	2.88	.86
Teacher should indicate the errors and provide clues about how to correct it.	4.26	.78
Teachers should directly provide the correct form of the errors.	3.60	1.13
Teachers should uses error codes/symbols to make the feedback more comprehensible.	3.20	1.14
TWF should focus on grammar.	4.12	.77
TWF should focus on ideas and content.	4.19	.67
TWF should focus on word choice.	3.92	.75
TWF should focus on organization.	3.87	.76
TWF should focus on spelling and punctuation.	3.08	.82
I want my teachers to call my name in the feedback.	3.94	.99
Valid N (listwise)		

The expectation to receive both praise and criticism in TWF receives the highest mean score of 4.29. It means that the students need more than a corrective feedback focusing on criticizing and correcting their errors. In fact, compliments appear to be significantly important to the students. The participants seem to prefer their teachers to comprehensively correct all their errors rather than selectively correct the important ones as the means scores for the options are respectively 3.98 (SD= 1.06) and 2.92 (SD= 1.20). Moreover, indirect feedback with clues is most favored by the students (M= 4.26; SD= 0.78), rather than direct feedback (M= 3.60; SD= 1.13) and indirect feedback with no clues (M= 2.88; SD= 0.86). The results also show that the students expect TWF to focus most on ideas and content (M=4.19; SD= 0.67) and grammar (M= 4.12; SD= 0.77) while spelling and punctuation (M= 3.08, SD= 0.82) receive least attention from the students. The last item get a relatively high mean score (M= 3.94, SD= 0.99). This result leads to the assumption that the participants hold positive attitude towards being addressed by their name in TWF.

4.2. Discussion

From the findings above, it can be concluded that TWF has a significant role in EFL writing classes. Most participants think their teachers' written feedback is helpful and utilize it to improve their writing. TWF is also perceived by the students as a stimulating aid which encourages them to write more and become a better writer. These findings support previous research confirming students' positive perceptions towards TWF (Alharbi, 2016; Al-Sawalh, 2016; Cahyani & Murtafi'ah, 2023). The results of this study are also aligned with another study (Saragih et al., 2021) revealing that the EFL students rarely find TWF discouraging and frustrating to them. However, while Saragih et al. (2021) found that "most students had no difficulty understanding comments or feedback from their teachers" (p.610), the participants of the current study do have some problems in dealing with TWF. This finding is in accordance with the study by Kurnia (2022) revealing that many students are unable to understand their teachers' comments or confused about what to do next. It seems that the most common problems students face when processing teachers written feedback stem from the feedback method in which the teachers only give coded general comments without any other instruction or suggestion.

In terms of the students' preferences for teachers' written feedback, the results are consistent with other research indicating that teacher's feedback with simultaneous appearance of praise and criticism is eagerly expected by most students (Al-Sawalh, 2016; Phung, 2020; Cahyani & Murtafi'ah, 2023). This may be a notable issue because many EFL teachers tend to focus primarily on error correction and underestimate motivational function of written feedback. In contrast to earlier findings which shown that students prefer to get feedback in selective approach marking only their crucial errors (Zarifi, 2017; Saragih et al., 2021; Muliyah et al., 2020), the participants in this study believe that all the errors in their writing should be marked. It can be seen that while some students "feel frustrated when they find their drafts full of comments, corrections, and circling"

(Mahfoodh & Pandian, 2011, p. 21), some others prefer comprehensive feedback which enable them to correct all errors and perfect their writing. Therefore, the EFL writing teachers are advised to carefully examine their students' need and preferences to choose an appropriate feedback approach. The findings are also consistent with those of Nguyen et al. (2021) who found that indirect feedback with clues was the most preferable type of feedback. It is therefore likely that although the students appreciate the advantage of indirect feedback and want to proactively solve their problems, additional guidance from their teachers is still essential. Obviously, students cannot learn from teachers' feedback and make progress if they are unable to understand it. As a result, many teachers even feel discouraged and start to doubt the effectiveness of their teaching method after seeing their students make the same types of error despite all the feedback they have been provided. Moreover, the results corroborate the ideas of Cahyani & Murtafi'ah (2023) who found that students expect TWF to give the most attention to ideas and content errors while spelling and punctuation problems are considered least significant. One interesting finding is that the students showed interest in receiving TWF addressing their names. Although this practice may not directly contribute to the academic effectiveness of TWF, it can, as stated by Phung (2020), "give them the feeling that they had been given personal attention and what is more, they felt that the teachers were talking to them" (p.24). The students then might gain more incentive to thoughtfully process their teacher's feedback and make better attempts.

V.CONCLUSION

The current study examined Vietnamese EFL students' perceptions and preferences for teachers' written feedback. The results showed that students hold positive perceptions toward the feedback they receive from their writing teachers. Especially, the research findings revealed that students mostly prefer comprehensive correction which indicates all errors in their writing. A strong proof of students' desire for self-correction was also demonstrated by their preference for indirect feedback. Furthermore, the study found that there are certain problems encountered by the students when processing TWF, especially the incomprehensibility of teachers' comments. Other factors relating to motivational effect of TWF such as students' desire to receive praise or personal treatment are also noteworthy findings. Therefore, teachers should be aware that their feedback not only aims to correct students' errors and improve the quality of their writing, but also to nurture students' confidence and learning motivation. Taken together, it is essential for EFL writing teachers to be cognizant of their students' proficiency, needs and preferences at the individual level. Additionally, they are encouraged to get themselves familiar with a wide range of feedback strategies to effectively utilize appropriate feedback method in specific situations. Then their feedback would be really supportive, actionable and motivational to their students.

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