

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF FORM AND CONTENT FEEDBACK ON EFL WRITING PROFICIENCY: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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Abstract: With process-oriented approaches becoming the norm in writing classes, teacher-written feedback has gained significance in teaching, learning, and educational research. As a result, writing instructors dedicate a considerable amount of time to providing feedback. However, research on the impact of written feedback from teachers has produced inconsistent findings regarding its effectiveness. The primary objective of this study is to examine the effects of feedback targeting form and content on the writing proficiency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in areas of content, organisation, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. For this study, we used a quasi-experimental design. We formed two groups: an experimental group that received feedback focused on content and a control group that received feedback focused on form. We collected both qualitative and quantitative data through writing tests as well as semi-structured interviews. The results showed significant improvement in writing for both groups. Qualitative analysis revealed that students still view grammar as important, strive for accuracy, and may resist feedback regarding the communication of information in their writing.

Keywords: Form-focused feedback, content-focused feedback, written teacher feedback, writing performance, EFL writing

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Introduction

In academic settings where English is used as an international language, there is a significant emphasis on writing and writing skills, as written texts serve as indicators of student proficiency in the second and foreign languages (Cumming, 2006). Writing courses have been the subject of numerous, often contradictory ideas regarding the most effective methods to teach it. Various instructional approaches are adopted to improve students' writing skills in writing classes. Hyland (2009) identifies three primary approaches to writing based on theories of texts, processes involved in creating texts, and the readers who bring a social dimension to writing. These approaches involve teaching practices that focus on the form of the text, the writer, and the reader. Product approaches, process approaches, and genre approaches are three prominent perspectives that have influenced the teaching of writing. Each approach emphasises different aspects of the writing process and offers distinct strategies for instruction.

Product Approach

One commonly used approach is the product approach, which stresses the final written product as the main focus of instruction. This approach involves guiding students through a series of structured steps, including pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing, to produce a piece of writing (Matsuda & Silva, 2013). The product approach places importance on aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, organisation, and coherence. Students receive instruction and feedback on these elements to improve their writing performance (Ferris, 2014). In this approach, writing is seen as an extension of grammar teaching, with texts considered context-free objects constructed according to grammatical rules and interpreted without taking into account the author, reader, or context. Teachers influenced by this approach tend to prioritise accuracy by giving feedback on grammar mistakes in student papers, sometimes overlooking the communicative aim of writing (Hyland, 2009). This approach is often used in traditional writing classrooms, where the teacher plays a central role in providing guidance and correction throughout the writing process.

Some criticisms of the product approach in EFL/ESL writing classes include its heavy emphasis on grammar instruction, controlled writing, and error correction (Susser, 1994). Too much emphasis on the final product can disregard the writing process and cause students to miss out on opportunities to develop critical thinking skills, creativity, and the ability to self-assess and revise their work. Prescribed forms and structures are frequently prioritised in product approaches, which seek to produce a certain outcome. However, this can reduce students' access to authentic writing opportunities where they can use their own voices and styles. Providing feedback after the writing is finalised may limit learners' opportunities for constructive feedback, thus hindering their improvement.

Product-oriented approaches are also criticised since they disregard the fact that grammatically correct writing is just one aspect of good writing and does not guarantee effective communication. If grammatically correct texts were sufficient for communication, there would be no issues with legal documents or different interpretations of the same text. Therefore, the teacher's mission should not solely focus on teaching accuracy, as the text itself may not adequately convey ideas (Hyland, 2008).

Process Approach

The process approaches were a response to the product approach in writing instruction. Process-oriented approaches prioritise the various stages of writing, such as generating ideas, planning, drafting, revising, and editing, rather than solely focusing on the final product. These approaches place less emphasis on grammar and text structure knowledge and more on guiding students through the writing process in planning, drafting, and editing to help them realise their potential (Badger & White, 2000). The role of the teacher is to facilitate writing by providing guidance in developing strategies, generating drafts, and refining ideas (Hyland, 2003). Writing is a dynamic process constructed by writers as they write, and it entails a continuous movement through various stages rather than a strictly linear procedure (Gardner & Johnson, 1997). Murray (1972) maintains that teachers should embrace "unfinished writing" and appreciate its incompleteness, enabling students to explore the world through language.

Genre Approach

The genre approach focuses on analysing and imitating different types of texts. It helps students develop their writing skills by studying the structure, language, and purpose of different genres. Different types of genres have distinct characteristics, structures, and language patterns. By understanding these features, students can learn to produce effective and appropriate texts in specific contexts. The objective is to provide students with the necessary knowledge and skills to confidently write in a variety of genres commonly encountered in academic, professional, and social environments.

Genre approaches share some similarities with product approaches in terms of considering writing as predominantly linguistic. Different from the product approach, the genre approach differs by placing greater emphasis on social contexts, wherein writing varies based on different situations. Different genres serve different purposes and exhibit distinct formats, linguistic features, and styles. For example, genres like recipes, personal letters, and song lyrics have specific purposes beyond the act of writing. Apart from purpose, audience, tone, and organisation are also important considerations in genre approaches (Badger & White, 2000). Students deconstruct sample texts, imitate the structure and

language features of model texts, engage in guided writing activities, and revise their writing based on feedback to refine their understanding of the genre and improve their writing skills. Writing instructors who adopt a genre approach view writing as a means to reach readers, and their role is to teach inexperienced writers how to use specific patterns to produce compositions. Writers do not write merely for the sake of writing but strive to achieve a purpose (Hyland, 2003).

Feedback

Within the process approach to writing, feedback plays a crucial role by providing writers with information to revise their texts (Keh, 1990). It serves as a valuable tool for teachers to demonstrate how well students have met the expectations and goals of the activities they have engaged in. Feedback offers students insights into their strengths and weaknesses, acknowledges their achievements, identifies areas for improvement, and provides guidance and instructions on how to enhance their writing (Bitchener, 2018).

Literature Review

The existing research literature and practical applications of written feedback encompass a wide range of variations. The applications in feedback practices can be broadly categorised as the type of feedback, the focus of feedback, the tone of feedback, the mode of feedback, the source of feedback and the comprehensiveness of feedback (Biber et al., 2011). Regarding the type of feedback, direct feedback involves providing explicit corrections or revisions to the writer. Indirect feedback, on the other hand, involves giving subtle hints or clues to prompt the writer to self-correct or revise their work.

The focus of feedback can be divided into two categories: form-focused and content-focused. Form-focused feedback is concerned with ensuring language accuracy and correctness, including aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation. On the other hand, content-focused feedback prioritises the effectiveness and coherence of ideas and content, as well as their organisation and development.

Feedback can have two different tones: criticism and appraisal. Criticism is used to point out errors, weaknesses, or areas that need improvement. On the other hand, appraisal is used to highlight the positive aspects of the writing, such as strengths, achievements, and effective elements.

There are three modes of feedback: oral, written, and computer-mediated. Oral feedback is delivered through spoken communication, either in person or through audio recordings. Written feedback is provided in written form, such as comments on the paper, annotations, or marginal notes. Computer-mediated

feedback is delivered through digital platforms or tools, including track changes, online comment features, or automated feedback systems.

Feedback can be generated by different sources. It can come from a teacher or instructor, self, peers, and computer programs or software in the form of automated feedback.

When it comes to the comprehensiveness of feedback, there are two types: comprehensive and focused. Comprehensive feedback covers multiple aspects of writing without specific targeting, while focused feedback targets specific aspects of writing, such as grammar or organisation.

Teacher feedback in writing can address both global and local issues. Global feedback focuses on aspects such as content, the development of ideas, and the overall structure of the writing, while local feedback aims to improve specific issues like sentence structure, word order, and accuracy (Ferris, 2003). When providing feedback, teachers may prioritise the quality of content and the organisation of the text (Al-Jarrah, 2016), and this form of feedback can be called content-focused feedback. They concentrate on identifying parts of the writing that fail to convey meaning or exhibit logical inconsistencies, offering comments to guide writers in the revision process. However, grammatical errors are often overlooked as teachers may have doubts about the effectiveness of error correction (Park, 2006).

Form-focused feedback, commonly known as written corrective feedback, is a widely used approach in writing classes. This method involves providing written feedback to students on the grammatical features of their work. Its purpose is to raise students' awareness of their grammatical errors and help them avoid repeating those errors in their future writing.

Truscott's (1996) controversial paper sparked a debate on the effectiveness of corrective feedback in writing instruction. Truscott argued that correcting students' errors is a futile activity that should be abandoned due to its negative impact on students. Truscott's paper generated extensive discussions among scholars, with Ferris (1999) carefully examining Truscott's points and concluding that his claim to abandon grammar correction was "premature and overly strong" (p.1). In the years that followed, there was a plethora of studies focusing on teacher-written feedback, particularly written corrective feedback. Numerous research investigations explored the practice of written corrective feedback and its positive effects on the revision process and the production of new pieces of writing (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Ashwell, 2000; Hyland, 2003; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Buckingham & Aktuğ-Ekinci, 2017; Bonilla López et al., 2018; Benson & DeKeyser, 2019; Li & Roshan, 2019; Karim & Nassaji, 2020).

Recent research in different contexts shows that language teachers might still tend to focus on local issues when providing feedback. Nguyen et al. (2021) found that teacher-written feedback was more inclined toward linguistic issues (e.g., grammar, spelling) rather than content or organisation, even though students preferred teacher feedback that addresses linguistic accuracy and global issues such as content and style. Similarly, Hakimi (2020) examined the impact of teacher-written feedback in EFL classrooms at a Moroccan high school. The results showed a predominant use of form-focused feedback by teachers, emphasising grammar and linguistic accuracy, mainly through correction symbols and commentary. However, the findings suggest that such grammar-focused feedback might not significantly improve students' overall writing skills. The research identified a gap between the feedback methods used and their effectiveness in enhancing student writing. In the same vein, Sinaga et al. (2020) explored the focus of written feedback provided by a teacher on students' writing. Their research centred on the feedback given to language students by one English teacher. Feedback was analysed from students' texts and supplemented by an interview with the teacher. The findings showed that the teacher paid attention to language form, text functions, content, creative expression, the writing process, and genre; however, a significantly higher emphasis was on language form (grammar, vocabulary, punctuation), and minimal attention was paid to the genre. Bhatta and Lian (2023) investigated the perceptions and practices related to teachers' written feedback among Chinese students in China. Findings revealed that teachers mainly focused on grammatical and vocabulary issues, neglecting broader content organisation and idea expression. The students showed a preference for more balanced feedback covering both detailed and overarching writing components. Similarly, Albelihi (2022) examined the preferences and beliefs of EFL teachers and learners in Saudi Arabia and found that even though teacher feedback addressed all language elements, including grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and content, a particular emphasis was laid on grammar by teachers.

Cheng et al. (2021) highlighted the discrepancies between novice EFL teachers' beliefs and practices concerning written feedback in a Chinese university context. Despite teachers' intentions to concentrate on broader content and organisation issues (global issues), there was a noticeable inclination towards focusing on linguistic accuracy, especially grammar (local issues), in their actual feedback practices. The findings underline the need for a more balanced approach to addressing both global and local aspects of student writing.

Pu (2023) investigated the effectiveness of automated feedback and teacher feedback in an online EFL writing context. Findings reveal that automated feedback provided more feedback, mainly focusing on grammar and mechanics, while teacher feedback offered deeper, content-related insights. Both feedback types received similar uptake rates from students, though meaning-level teacher

feedback was utilised more by students. Students appreciated automated feedback for its quick and private responses yet criticised its superficiality; they respected teacher feedback for its depth but sometimes disregarded it due to a focus on grades. The study identified several factors influencing feedback uptake, including English proficiency, feedback preference, feedback relevance, essay scores, and motivation.

Despite the considerable amount of research conducted on the effectiveness of written corrective feedback, the results regarding its impact on second language development and accuracy remain inconclusive and subject to ongoing debate (Junqueira & Payant, 2015). Even though a lot of empirical research has been conducted up to this point, there are still problems with experimental design and variable control, which leads to conflicting results across numerous studies (Miao et al., 2023)

Due to the complex nature of contexts and feedback, achieving a recipe for effective feedback is challenging. It would be illogical to seek a one-size-fits-all approach, as different contexts and settings have specific characteristics that vary greatly. A feedback strategy that proves effective in one context may be ineffective in another (Ellis, 2008). The challenge of providing effective feedback remains a pressing issue for writing teachers across different contexts, and there are numerous unanswered questions regarding what constitutes effective feedback (Hyland, 2009). Similarly, even though language teachers invest significant time in providing feedback on student writings, a sense of dissatisfaction among students and teachers persists, and doubts about the effectiveness of feedback still prevail in language teaching (Ferris, 2014).

Traditionally, writing instruction has heavily emphasised form, focusing on mechanics and grammar while neglecting the generation of content and ideas expressed by students (Hillocks, 2005). The belief has been that once students have a grasp of various forms and structures in their writing, they will automatically possess the necessary skills to develop ideas and engage with the subject matter. However, simply mastering form does not guarantee the ability to effectively develop ideas and handle the content (Hillocks, 2005). Writing classes often prioritise the syntactic aspects of writing, while the communicative aspects receive less attention despite teachers' intentions to adopt a process-oriented approach to teaching writing. Teachers often focus primarily on local issues, neglecting the fundamental purpose of writing, which is communication. However, at its core, writing is a communicative act. It involves not only constructing grammatically correct sentences but also expressing students' ideas and showcasing their understanding. The message conveyed should carry more weight than its grammar. Therefore, in writing classes, it is important to address the content of the work alongside surface-level problems (Baghzou, 2011).

Taking inspiration from these observations, the present study aims to investigate the impact of written teacher feedback on the writing proficiency of preparatory school university students in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Specifically, the study seeks to explore whether the type of written feedback received, focusing either on form or content, influences students' overall writing performance. Students' perspectives on these two types of written feedback strategies are also explored.

This study aims to provide answers to the following research inquiries regarding the improvement of writing skills among EFL students at the tertiary level:

1. What impact do form-focused and content-focused written teacher feedback have on EFL learners' writing proficiency?
2. Is there a significant difference in the writing performance of students who receive form-focused feedback versus those who receive content-focused feedback?
3. How do EFL students at the tertiary level perceive form-focused written teacher feedback?
4. How do EFL students at the tertiary level perceive content-focused written teacher feedback?

Method

Research Design

In this research, mixed methods were used to compare the efficiency of two different forms of written teacher feedback. The study involved a quasi-experimental nonequivalent control group design that included a control and experimental group. The classes were pre-formed, so random selection of students was not possible. Both groups took pre-tests and post-tests, and the scores were compared for analysis to identify differences between the groups. To ensure internal validity, several measures were taken, including selecting two classes from the same school, taught by the same teacher, with students of similar ages and class placement based on a placement test. Before treatment, a writing test was administered to evaluate if there were any significant differences in writing performance between the groups.

Setting

The study was conducted in a school of foreign languages in a state school in Turkey. The School of Foreign Languages offers a one-year intensive English program for students who have not achieved the necessary proficiency levels to gain admission into their departments. The school of foreign languages houses two courses: a main course that teaches all skills in an integrated way and a

reading and writing course. In the writing course, the instructors focused on aspects such as grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation, and other structural elements of language while providing feedback. An error correction code form, which includes explanations about the points to address with examples, was distributed to the instructors and students. The instructors follow this document to give feedback.

Sampling and participants

For this quasi-experimental study, 35 students who were taking English as a Foreign Language at a preparatory program were recruited through convenience sampling. Two B1 level groups, one consisting of 15 students and the other of 20 students, were selected for the study. These groups were chosen as they were expected to be proficient enough in English to respond well to teacher feedback. The first researcher taught the classes included in the study. All participants were fully informed about the study and provided their consent through signed forms.

To ensure the homogeneity of the groups, a writing test was used at the start of the study. The pre-test scores were examined for any existing differences between the groups that could impact the study's internal validity. The pre-test results showed that there were no significant differences between the classes regarding writing performance.

Procedure

Before the study began, one of the teacher-researchers informed the participants about the experiment and invited them to participate. Ethical clearance was obtained from students who wished to take part in the study. Over a period of ten weeks, the classes were instructed by the first researcher in a similar manner, except for the type of feedback they received during the feedback sessions. Participants completed eight tasks. While the experimental group received content-focused written feedback from the teacher on their paragraphs, the control group received form-focused written feedback. In the control group, the teacher used correction codes indicating mistakes, accompanied by comments at the end of the paragraphs. The usual procedure for instructors in the school was to mark aspects such as grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation, and other structural elements of language on student papers. Bates et al.'s (1993) guidelines were followed when giving feedback on sentence-level errors.

The experimental group received comments related to content. The comments were given in the form of questions, requests, and imperatives, both in the margins and as end comments. The teacher-researcher used comments to emphasise the positive aspects and areas for improvement in the students' writing. The first

researcher provided content-related feedback to the students' compositions, following the categories outlined by Bates et al. (1993) and Ashwell (2000).

The writing tasks used during instruction were based on the reading and writing course syllabus of the school. After the treatment, writing tests were applied again. Finally, semi-structured interviews were held with the participants.

Data Collection Tools

Writing tests were given to both the control group and the experimental group before and after the experiment. The tests were graded using an analytic scoring rubric developed by Tribble (1996). The use of an analytic scoring rubric was preferred because it provides a comprehensive assessment of the student's writing performance across different aspects, including content, language proficiency, vocabulary, and mechanics. To ensure the reliability of scores, two independent raters rated each paper on a scale of 100, and scores were averaged. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to test inter-rater reliability ($r=.472$, $p<.01$). Pre-test scores were used to compare the writing proficiency of the two groups before the study began. An independent t-test was used to compare pre-test and post-test scores to determine if there were significant improvements over the term.

To gain more comprehensive insights into the perceptions of written teacher feedback, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from both the experimental and control groups. Consent was obtained from each participant before the sessions, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis and Results

Writing tests

The data from writing pre-tests and post-tests were analysed using parametric methods, as the data appeared to be normally distributed. The writing pre-test scores had a skewness of .43 and a kurtosis of .36, while the writing post-test scores had a skewness of .22 and a kurtosis of -.49. Results from the Shapiro-Wilks normality test indicated that both sets of data had a normal distribution ($p>.05$).

To determine whether the experimental and control groups had significantly different writing proficiency at the beginning of the study, an independent t-test was conducted on the pre-test scores. The results showed that there was no significant difference between the groups ($t=1.44$, $p>.05$).

Table 1 displays the independent samples t-test results for the pre-test writing scores of the experimental and control groups, including the number of participants, mean scores, and standard deviations.

Table 1. Comparing Pre-test Writing Scores: Independent Samples T-test Results for Experimental and Control Groups

Groups	n	x	S.d	t	p
Experimental	15	43.33	3.29	1.44	.15
Control	20	41.30	4.63		

A paired samples t-test was performed to examine whether the experimental and control groups had significant improvements in paragraph writing. The results revealed that both groups had significant differences between their pre-test and post-test scores (experimental group: $t=-5.98$, $p<.01$, control group: $t=-6.25$, $p<.01$). The mean pre-test score for the experimental group was 43.53, while the mean post-test score was 52.93. Similarly, the mean pre-test score for the control group was 41.30, while the mean post-test score was 52.50.

Table 2. Writing Pre-test and Post-test Scores: Paired Samples t-Test Results for the Experimental Group

Writing tests of the Experiential group	n	x	S.D	Degree of freedom	t	p
Pre-test	15	43.53	3.29	14	-5.98	.00
Post-test	15	52.93	7.31	19		

Table 3. Writing Pre-test and Post-test Scores: Paired Samples t-Test Results for the Control Group

Writing tests of the Control group	n	x	Standard deviation	Degree of freedom	t	p
Pre-test	20	41.30	4.63	19	-6.25	.00
Post-test	20	52.50	10.25			

After the treatment, the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups were compared using an independent t-test to determine if there were any significant differences between the groups. The analysis revealed that there was no statistically significant distinction between the two groups in terms of their post-test writing scores ($t = 0.13$, $p > 0.05$). This implies that the overall writing performance scores of both the experimental and control groups were similar after the feedback practices. The improvement in the writing performance of both groups was comparable, indicating that neither group outperformed the other.

Table 4. *Comparing Writing Post-test Scores: Independent Samples t-Test Results for Experimental and Control Groups*

Group	n	x	Std. deviation	Degree of freedom	t	p
Experimental	15	52.93	7.32	33	.13	.89
Control	20	52.50	10.25			

Analysing qualitative data

The analysis of the qualitative data involved employing conceptual content analysis, which aims to identify and quantify the occurrences of words, phrases, concepts, or themes. This is a form of content analysis that helps identify specific words or concepts in texts or text collections (Christie, 2007). The analysis revealed three categories: effects of written feedback on writing, perceived advantages, and perceived disadvantages. Participants' opinions were presented with quotes from the data.

Form-focused written feedback

The effects of receiving form-focused teacher written feedback on writing

After asking the students in the control group about the impact of receiving feedback on their English writing skills, it was found that all of them agreed that it was helpful in enhancing their writing abilities. Specifically, the students (totalling 12) noted that feedback helped them improve the accuracy of their writing through consistent practice. They stated that they mainly focused on addressing significant issues like word order, sentence structure, and verb tense errors, as well as minor issues like article and preposition mistakes.

Student 12: "I found the process to be valuable and beneficial, as I observed a decrease in the number of mistakes over time. I considered it to be a positive and highly useful experience."

The students' responses to the question regarding the impact of form-focused teacher-written feedback on their writing implied that their writing had improved. They reported a decrease in grammar mistakes in their subsequent writings, indicating progress. Additionally, the students highlighted the benefits of feedback in terms of vocabulary development. They mentioned that they often encountered meaning-related issues due to using inappropriate or incorrect words in their writing, and the feedback provided by the teacher helped clarify that the intended meaning was not achieved. Some students also acknowledged the challenges arising from applying Turkish sentence structure when writing

in English. Two students admitted to initially composing paragraphs in Turkish and then translating them into English, but they realised that this approach led to poorly structured sentences in English writing classes.

Student 5: "I occasionally faced confusion with word meanings. To address this issue, I took the initiative to search for the words I used incorrectly. I found this strategy to be effective in improving my understanding and usage of words."

Several students, including Student 5, mentioned that they had noticed improvements in their organisation and paragraph structure. This suggests that they have made progress in structuring their written work in a more organised and coherent manner.

Student 5: "I had a tendency to jump from one idea to another, resulting in complicated paragraphs. However, through consistent writing practice, I was able to improve and successfully organise my ideas within paragraphs."

In addition to improvements in organisation, some students (5) mentioned that they had also developed their content. This suggests that they have become more proficient in generating and presenting meaningful and relevant ideas within their writing. Their comments indicate progress in terms of both structural organisation and the quality of the content they produce. Student 3 shared their initial struggle with writing, particularly in terms of sentence order and utilising Turkish syntax in English writing.

Student 3: "At first, my paragraphs were problematic. I had difficulty ordering my sentences, and I followed Turkish syntax to write. Now, I focus on explaining my ideas clearly and have found this approach beneficial in improving both my paragraph structure and content."

This indicates that the students have developed a better understanding of language use and vocabulary, as well as organising sentences and presenting their thoughts effectively within their writing with the help of feedback on form. The students' reports of improvement in aspects of writing on which they did not receive direct feedback are noteworthy. When asked about the reason behind this, some students explained that during the revision process, they took notice of content and organisation issues and made necessary improvements. This suggests that their self-awareness and active revision efforts contributed to their progress in these areas. Another possible factor influencing the students' perceived improvement in content and organisation is the writing instruction they received throughout the term. The guidance and instruction provided to them may have played a role in enhancing their understanding and application of effective content and organisational strategies in their writing.

Perceived advantages of receiving form-focused written teacher feedback

When asked about the advantages of receiving form-focused feedback in their writing, all 12 students expressed positive views and believed that it would contribute to their improvement. They acknowledged that it helped them write better at the end of the term.

One student, Student 2, mentioned that before receiving feedback, they struggled to generate ideas and felt their mind was blank. However, after receiving form-focused feedback, they gained confidence in starting their writing and deciding what to write about

Student 2: “I used to struggle to generate ideas and felt my mind was blank. I did not know what to write. I have gained confidence in writing and deciding what to write about.”

The students unanimously acknowledged that one of the primary advantages of receiving form-focused feedback was an improved command of grammar. They found that through the feedback provided by their teachers, they were able to identify and address frequent mistakes in their papers. As a result, they observed tangible improvements in their subsequent writings.

Student 7: “My initial writings included more mistakes in areas such as auxiliary verbs and verb tenses. However, with the help of form-focused feedback, I observed a decrease in the number of mistakes compared to the past.”

The students also indicated that by acknowledging the errors in their previous writings, they were able to avoid repeating those same mistakes in their future writing. Some examples of student responses are as follows:

Student 11: “I don’t make the same mistakes when I see them many times.”

It was evident that students held positive attitudes towards error correction. They recognised that having no mistakes meant there would be no progress or improvement on their part. One student expressed their thoughts on the matter:

Student 4: “I enjoyed observing my mistakes because I believe it allows me to grow and develop. Having no mistakes signifies a lack of progress. When we make errors, we are provided with more opportunities to learn. In that sense, it becomes an enjoyable experience.”

Students also expressed that monitoring their progress brought them happiness:

Student 8: “Seeing that what I wrote is correct brings me joy. In fact, it feels satisfying to be capable of producing written content.”

Based on the responses from the students in the control group, it can be inferred that the students were satisfied with the traditional form-focused feedback they received.

Perceived disadvantages of receiving form-focused written teacher feedback

When asked about the potential drawbacks of receiving form-focused feedback, the students were given an opportunity to express their thoughts on unhelpful aspects of teacher feedback. Five students were critical of the feedback they received, as it solely focused on correcting language errors and did not include comments on the content of their ideas. They believed that content played a significant role in writing, and mere grammatical accuracy alone did not determine the success of their writing.

Student 3: “On certain occasions, I put effort into expanding on the writing tasks. However, since I didn’t receive any feedback on the content of those writings, I had no way of knowing whether they were of good quality or not. It would be highly beneficial if I could receive feedback specifically addressing the content aspect.”

One student emphasised that emphasising grammatical accuracy restricted their creativity, leading them to write simple sentences that didn’t truly convey their intended meaning.

Student 4: “I can write my ideas in a simple way, but I don’t want to write in a simple way. After your feedback, I simplify my sentences. In that case, I also simplify my ideas, but now it is not what I want to say”.

Two students raised a concern regarding the quantity of feedback they received. While the majority of students didn’t mind seeing their mistakes and had a positive attitude towards error correction, a small group of students expressed feelings of discouragement due to the overwhelming amount of feedback they received. They mentioned that having numerous mistakes in their writing dampened their motivation to revise and left them feeling disheartened.

Student 10: “When I have few mistakes, I want to write more; but when I have a lot of mistakes, I think that I can’t write and lose my interest.”

Content-focused written feedback

The effects of receiving content-focused teacher written feedback on writing

When asked about their opinions on the effectiveness of the teacher feedback they received on their writing, the students in the experiment group generally had a positive perception of the feedback’s impact on the content aspect. Students shared their reflections on the matter:

Student 8: “It is helpful to see my weaknesses. You point out that I have written a lot of things irrelevant to the subject. Sometimes, I write everything that comes to my mind to meet the word count criterion. But when I look at it later, I understand that it is really irrelevant, and I take it out. It helped me to have unity in my paragraphs. I learned how to connect my sentences meaningfully.”

Student 7: “The feedback I received in the writing course was useful to me. I am not good at writing, even in Turkish. The feedback you gave me, such as asking me to give more details, led me to think more comprehensively and write in a more detailed way, so I think it was very useful”.

Based on the comments, it can be deduced that the students who received feedback on their content believed that such feedback played a significant role in helping them achieve clarity of meaning, adequately support their ideas, and establish a logical sequence of ideas in their writing. A common reason cited for the effectiveness of teacher feedback was that it highlighted the weak areas in the students’ writing, enabling them to identify and address the problematic parts. Many students acknowledged that they became aware of meaning-related issues and found ways to rectify these problems through the feedback provided by their teacher.

Furthermore, a majority of the students expressed that teacher feedback played a role in enhancing their writing in various aspects. They highlighted that the feedback helped them achieve paragraph unity, appropriately develop ideas, support their ideas with examples and facts, and effectively utilise transitional signals in their writing. This indicates that the teacher’s feedback had a positive impact on their ability to structure and strengthen their written compositions.

Student 10: “I used to write in a chaotic way. I used to write about something and then jump to another idea. I remembered I had forgotten to give examples for the previous idea and provided one. So my paragraphs turned out to be disorganised”.

An unexpected outcome of the content-focused feedback on student writings was that some students, despite receiving feedback on the meaning and content of their writing, also addressed their grammar mistakes based on that feedback. They explained that when they realised a sentence was unclear, they attributed it to grammar issues and attempted to convey their intended message by correcting the grammar mistake. Additionally, during the revision process, they noticed mistakes in their writing that were not due to a lack of grammar knowledge but rather situational factors. These students acknowledged that teacher feedback highlighted instances where they expressed their ideas ineffectively or poorly. They admitted that direct translations from their native language into the target language caused difficulties in their writing. Through the teacher’s feedback, they became aware that the sentences did not accurately convey their intended message. Therefore, even though the teacher did not provide explicit grammar feedback, they felt compelled to revise the grammar because they believed it was the main source of ambiguity in their writing.

Student 7: “I have a number of mistakes in my first drafts. However, although you focus mainly on content, I see my grammatical mistakes when I revise it, and I also pay attention to these grammar mistakes.”

Some students expressed dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the feedback they received. One reason cited was their lack of enthusiasm for the revision process. One student expressed their thoughts on the matter:

Student 5: “I don’t think it was useful. I need to see my grammar mistakes.”

Student 1: “I don’t act on feedback because I focus on grades, and I don’t receive grades from class writings.”

Based on the students’ comments, it can be deduced that several factors influenced the effectiveness of content-focused feedback. Due to their strong motivation for grades, some students may not have perceived the need to utilise teacher feedback as a means to improve their writing. The self-efficacy attitudes of the students also played a significant role in determining the extent to which they incorporated teacher feedback into their writing. Students who believed they were already proficient writers tended to pay less attention to teacher feedback. They may have associated writing primarily with the ability to construct grammatically correct sentences. Since they did not receive feedback on grammar mistakes, they assumed they were skilled writers.

Perceived advantages of receiving content-focused written teacher feedback

When asked about the positive effects and advantages of receiving content-focused written teacher feedback, the students in the experimental group responded positively. The majority of students emphasised the importance of identifying the issues in their writing through teacher feedback and regarded it as a positive experience. They acknowledged that such feedback provided them with an opportunity to improve and enhance their writing skills.

Student 10: “We noticed the mistakes and realised they needed to be fixed.”

The emotional response to feedback was another significant aspect highlighted by the students. They reported positive effects of teacher feedback on their motivation and confidence levels. Some students specifically mentioned that the tone of the teacher played a crucial role. When they received positive feedback and recognition for their writing, they experienced a sense of accomplishment and felt encouraged to continue writing. This positive emotional response fostered a “can-do” attitude among the students, further motivating them to engage in writing activities.

Student 10: “When playing games, we communicate in the universal language, English. When you gave me good, positive feedback, I became willing to chat more with other players. I felt self-confident. I thought if the teacher said so, I was good at English.”

Perceived disadvantages of receiving content-focused written teacher feedback

When asked about the potential disadvantages of receiving content-focused feedback and any negative emotions or experiences, most students expressed that it was helpful. Still, students brought about some undesirable effects of this type of feedback. They argued that receiving feedback on grammar was more important than receiving feedback on content. Around half of the students (5) stressed the necessity of grammar correction. Students shared their perspectives on this issue:

Student 6: “I need to work on my grammar. I think you should also consider my papers in terms of grammar.”

Based on the comments provided, it can be inferred that the students in question are still influenced by grammar-focused teaching and learning approaches, and they prefer corrective feedback that primarily addresses grammar mistakes. They view writing as a domain primarily meant for practising grammar, and they rely on writing classes to test their grammatical knowledge. They perceive themselves as incapable of self-correcting their mistakes and express concerns about the potential fossilisation of errors if not corrected by the teacher during the feedback process. Additionally, they express worries about the impact of uncorrected mistakes on their performance in grammar-focused exams. The students’ attitudes towards writing have been shaped by their prior learning experiences, which prioritise grammar accuracy. Consequently, teacher practices that heavily emphasise students’ writing mistakes contribute to the perception that writing well necessitates the production of grammatically correct sentences.

While the majority of students appreciated the identification of weak areas in their writing and accepted feedback in that regard, there were some students who held contrasting views. They expressed that receiving negative comments and becoming aware of problems in their writing had a negative impact on them. Another issue that emerged was the amount of teacher feedback, which resulted in some students losing interest in writing.

Student 5: “If there was a lot to be corrected in the first draft, I did not want to do it. I don’t want to make so many mistakes. I lose my interest.”

These reactions may be influenced by the characteristics of high-context cultures, where preserving one’s reputation or “face” is of great importance, and criticism may not be readily welcomed.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the effectiveness of two types of written teacher feedback on the overall writing of EFL students. Specifically, it aimed to compare the impact of content-focused written feedback and traditional form-focused written feedback. Additionally, the study sought to explore the students' perceptions of these two feedback approaches in writing classes.

Through the application of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test, a comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores for both groups in the writing tests revealed a significant difference. This indicates that teacher feedback, regardless of its type, had a positive impact on the writing performance of the students in both the control and experimental groups.

The analysis of semi-structured interviews indicated that the students relied on teacher feedback and regarded it as a valuable tool for identifying their mistakes. Specifically, when it came to corrective feedback, the students expressed a need for feedback on grammar errors in their papers. This reliance on teacher feedback stemmed from their doubts about their own writing proficiency and their belief that they required guidance from a more knowledgeable source. The students' perceptions of the role of writing seemed to be fixed, viewing writing primarily as a vehicle for grammar rather than as a means of self-expression.

This inclination may be attributed to their prior writing experiences, which traditionally emphasised error correction and instruction that placed significant emphasis on the linguistic accuracy of their writing. While error correction is seen as valuable by both students and teachers as it helps learners become aware of their errors (Hyland, 2003), an excessive focus on correct structures in English may inadvertently limit students to producing only the structures they feel confident in using correctly. Consequently, this inhibits them from practising and producing more complex language patterns.

Below are the research questions and the major findings of the study, which have been presented after conducting both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Through the first research question, the aim was to discover whether form-focused and content-focused written teacher feedback had any impact on enhancing the writing performance of EFL preparatory school students. It was observed that the performance of students in both groups significantly improved in their writing skills in new writings that were evaluated by an analytic scoring rubric. This outcome was consistent with the conclusion of Fathman and Whalley (1990), who found that both form-focused and content-focused feedback had a positive influence on students' writing abilities. However, this result contradicts Chandler's (2003) finding that students who received written corrective feedback did not exhibit any progress in their overall writing

quality. Additionally, qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with the students in the control group demonstrated that students perceived written teacher feedback to be useful in identifying their errors. They revised their writings based on the indirect feedback provided by the teacher, and they felt that it helped them improve since they were actively involved in correcting their mistakes. This finding was also reported by Buckingham and Aktuğ-Ekinci (2017), who found that students valued indirect written feedback and had a positive attitude toward WCF. Moreover, the students in the experimental group believed that their writing skills had improved. Most of the students noted that they could see their progress by simply comparing their first and last writings in their portfolios.

The second research question aimed to determine if there was a significant difference in writing performance between students who received form-focused feedback and those who received content-focused feedback based on the feedback type. Analysis using a paired samples t-test demonstrated a significant increase in writing pre-test and post-test scores for the experimental group that received content-focused feedback ($t=-5.98$, $p<.01$). This suggests that content-focused feedback was effective in enhancing student writing performance. Similarly, paired t-test analysis showed that there was a significant difference in pre-test and post-test scores for the control group that received form-focused feedback ($t=-6.25$, $p<.01$). This finding can be explained by the fact that both groups received the same writing instruction and underwent comparable processes while composing their texts. The finding shows that content-focused feedback is as effective as form-focused feedback in improving writing performance. This information could be useful in changing the perception of the value of error correction. Both types of feedback improved student writing performance, as shown by significant differences in pre-test and post-test scores. However, there was no significant difference in overall writing performance scores between the experimental and control groups. Therefore, it is not possible to determine if one type of feedback is more effective than the other.

Through the third research question, the aim was to determine the perceptions of Turkish EFL students concerning written teacher feedback with a focus on form. Semi-structured interviews revealed that the students held a favourable view of writing activities in general and the provision of feedback, as it assisted them in recognising their mistakes and prompted revision. The students expressed positive opinions of teacher feedback and expected it, believing it would lead to improved accuracy in their writing by addressing both major and minor issues. This finding aligns with a previous study, which found that no students objected to receiving error correction, and the most preferred technique was marking errors and labelling them with an error correction code (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Students welcomed form-focused feedback in the form of

indirect feedback, as they believed it created an awareness of problematic areas in their writing and helped them avoid errors in subsequent writings. These results are consistent with those of Chaudron (1988), who found that students felt their mistakes would be reduced in subsequent writings if they were pointed out by the teacher. The main advantage of receiving form-focused feedback, according to the students, was achieving greater mastery of grammar. Form-focused treatment on their papers enabled them to pay attention to minor and major mistakes, leading to improved linguistic accuracy in their writing. This finding is similar to that of Leki (1991), who found that students preferred error correction and viewed having error-free texts as their primary concern.

Although form-focused teacher treatment has been praised for its benefits, it has been discovered that not receiving feedback on content, which is also a crucial aspect of good writing, can lead to sacrificing the intended meaning for grammatical accuracy. Additionally, receiving numerous corrections on papers can cause a loss of confidence and enthusiasm in writing. These are some of the downsides of form-focused feedback provision. Based on this finding, it is possible that learners may become overly focused on linguistic features.

In the study, the fourth research question aimed to uncover the perceptions of Turkish EFL students on content-focused written teacher feedback. The experimental group was interviewed, and the findings showed that the students were content with the writing activities, as was the control group. Additionally, the majority of students believed that their writing skills had improved significantly during the period. Students' improved writing abilities were demonstrated by their writing at the end of the period, which was comparatively better than their earlier writing. However, some students believed that paragraphs without grammar errors were essential and focused on the final product instead of the process. This finding coincides with Leki's (1991) discovery that students were concerned about grammar mistakes in their writing. The content-focused group of students had a positive attitude towards feedback provision and believed that feedback helped them fix meaning-related issues and express their ideas better in their writing. Teacher feedback assisted them in writing by highlighting problematic areas and encouraging them to find solutions to meaning-related problems. One of the interesting findings from the interviews was that some students believed that teacher feedback helped them with their grammar mistakes, even though they did not receive error correction treatment. They paid more attention to the structure and grammar of their papers during the revision process when they realised that the intended message was not conveyed. They also recognised their own errors without explicit teacher feedback. The students mentioned that they felt motivated and confident to write more after receiving feedback on the strong parts of their writing. Feedback on the weak parts of their writing was perceived positively, as it allowed them to improve their writing.

Students in a content-focused writing group expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of grammar correction in their writing instruction. They believe they need to practice and improve their grammar and rely on their teachers to correct their mistakes. This preference for error correction may be a result of previous product-oriented writing instruction that emphasised grammar accuracy. The students tend to prioritise grammar over the communicative role of writing, which may be a result of years of grammar-dominated teaching practices. Changing their perceptions towards writing may be difficult.

Conclusion

This study has indicated that providing written feedback to EFL learners, including both corrective feedback and comments on content, can be advantageous. Therefore, it is important for EFL instructors to be attentive to their students' feedback needs in writing classes and utilise both forms of feedback in EFL contexts. This approach can enhance EFL learners' writing performance in EFL programs.

In writing classes, teacher feedback is typically essential. Knowing how to effectively utilise it can ensure success and motivate learners in any learning environment. However, teachers may struggle with what to focus on in student writing. The results of this study suggest that utilising multi-draft writing and feedback provision can enhance learner writing, regardless of the focus of feedback. Learners value writing teachers' feedback. While error correction in writing classes is not dismissed, this study aims to raise awareness about the true purpose of writing, which is communication. It is important to recognise that both form-focused and content-focused feedback are not separate entities but rather two aspects of the same concept. A balanced mix of form-focused and content-focused feedback needs to be employed, and teacher training programs should adapt to better prepare teachers to deliver feedback that aids in improving both linguistic accuracy and content quality (Hakimi, 2020).

Although this study offers useful insights regarding the feedback provision in the EFL contexts, it should be noted that it has limitations. While appropriate for a typical classroom, the quasi-experimental approach restricts the capacity to account for all external variables that might have an effect on writing improvement. Furthermore, the length of the study and the sample size can limit the extent to which the results can be generalised. To confirm the findings of the study, future studies might benefit from longer intervention periods and varied participants. Future research might examine the long-term impacts of feedback on improving the development of writing. It would be helpful to explore how various kinds of feedback affect micro-skills of writing, such as sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, word choice, paragraph structure and idea development, as well as other major language skills.

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