

Investigating Written Feedback on Students' Academic Writing

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Abstract— Written feedback in academic writing is an essential factor that enables teacher and students to interact with each other in order to improve students' writing. This research aims to find out the types of written feedback the teachers use for students' academic writing, the most useful feedback, and effective feedbacks as perceived by students to help them improve academic writing. The present study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. To collect the data, interview was used. Participants of the research were five students in an English Education Department in a private university in Yogyakarta. During the data collection process, the students were in the process of writing their undergraduate thesis as the fulfilment for undergraduate degree. The findings indicated that there were three types of written feedback *i.e.* symbols, note, and error correction. Additionally, students perceived written feedback related to the grammar to be the most useful written feedback for them. At last, students perceived that effective written feedback should be understandable meaning that feedback should be simple, clear, and easy to understand. Moreover, effective feedback should also be detailed.

Keywords—*feedback, written feedback, academic writing, students' writing*

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a type of writing which is specifically made for academic purposes. The academic purposes include paper presentation in a conference, journal article, thesis, and dissertation, among others. Academic writing is different from other kinds of writings as it uses formal and standard language and also strict regulation of the format of writing. As it is for academic purposes, academic writing is closely related to certain concepts or theories as the foundation or framework of thinking [1].

In the academic writing process, the writers need feedback to improve their writing. Within the setting of higher education, the feedback can be from peer or teacher. The peer may give both oral and written feedback by having peer review, while teacher can give feedback from consultation. Students as the writers will use the feedback as the input to improve their writing.

Feedback is essential for students' writing [2]. Feedback is regarded as the key factor of the growth of writing skills. Through feedback, students can get much valuable input to improve their writing. Therefore, it is important that teachers provide students with good feedback in order to assist students to access knowledge and implement it through practices [3].

However, in giving feedback, teachers may not always provide students with effective feedback. Mack [4] stated that teachers rarely consider the types of feedback suitable for the students, and whether the feedback will help students improve their writing. As a result, students found it difficult to respond to the feedback.

Hence, to improve the quality of students' academic writing, teachers need to improve the quality of their feedback. Effective feedback in writing has been investigated in several studies ([7], [13], [18], [20], [21]), and few of them specifically talked about effective written feedback in academic writing. This research aims to find out types of written feedback the teachers use for students' academic writing, the most useful written feedbacks as perceived by students to help them improve academic writing, and the students' perception about effective written feedback. The research questions that this research wants to answer are as follows.

1. What are the types of written feedback the teachers use for students' academic writing?
2. Which written feedback is perceived to be the most useful in helping students improve their writing?
3. What makes an effective written feedback?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides theoretical review of feedback in general, written feedback, feedback on form versus feedback on content, and feedback as a dialogue. It aims to give the theoretical foundation of the study as the basis of its theoretical framework

A. Feedback and Written Feedback

Feedback has integral part in learning as Race [5] stated that it is important in all learning contexts. The importance of feedback emerges with the development of student-centered learning especially in language education context. Feedback is the response to the increase of students' role in the learning. Teacher as facilitator can make use feedback to maintain the learning progress of the students as well as monitor the learning itself.

J. Hattie and H. Timperley [2] defined feedback as any information provided by teacher, peer, parents, or other people regarding to someone's performance or understanding. It means that feedback is something that is given by a person or people responding to certain performance or comprehension. More specifically, in learning of writing, feedback is any information given by teacher to the students for the improvement of their writing skills [6].

Feedback is seen as the key element of the growth of writing skills. Feedback is important in providing students with the academic and professional literacy skills and it is a way of assisting students in negotiating access to knowledge and practices [3]. Moreover, H. Ravand and A. E. Rasekh [3] stated that one of the most important activities done by teachers in second language writing was about responding to the students' writing. In addition, feedback is important in academic writing. Feedback has been indicated to help students improve writing as found in previous studies ([7], [8], [9], [10], [11]). Moreover, teacher's feedback is potentially the most frequent mode for teacher to give assistance to the students as well as help them apply their recent acquired knowledge. It is the time for the students to have better understanding to know about their writing [12].

There are two types of feedback writing *i.e.* oral feedback and written feedback. Oral feedback is a type of feedback which is delivered verbally. It can be given to an individual, number of students, or even the students as a whole during the writing task [13]. Oral feedback can be provided promptly and frequently to the students. Students can be notified of their deficiency through the interaction between student and teacher [14]. Meanwhile, written feedback is a type of feedback which is provided in written form through writing. The teacher will give written feedback after students finish writing task by writing correct form and give information about the error and correction that should be made. J. Harmer [15] differentiated written feedback into two categories: responding and correcting. Responding written feedback concerns with the content and writing outline, teacher's focus on generic issue, and gives general comments on those aspects. Correcting written feedback focuses on pointing and determining structural error and mistakes made.

There are numerous studies concerning written corrective feedback (*e.g.* error identification, meta-linguistic feedback, comments on contents, indirect error correction, and indirect error correction) in writing which has different effects (*e.g.*, [16], [11], [17], [9], [10], [18], [19], [21], [21]). The aim of written corrective feedback is to provide information about correctness and incorrectness of the writing versus well-established language conventions [16]. However, other types of feedback address different aspects in writing. For example, feedback may be given in the form of suggestion for possible improvement.

In addition, R. Ellis [22] proposed corrective feedback strategies which involve direct corrective feedback, indirect corrective feedback, meta-linguistic feedback, electronic feedback, and reformulation. In the direct collective feedback, teacher directly gives the correct form of the writing to the students. It is useful to maintain the students' writing progress. However, the aspect or language feature that is focused goes in the short term. It is because there is no process in which the students experience a phase where they analyze and formulate the correct form of the language and produces the correct language in a meaningful mode. C. G. van Beuningen, N. H. de Jong, and F. Kuiken [23] stated that direct corrective feedback tends to be more effective in enhancing the accuracy of students' writing.

Further R. Ellis [22] stated the next strategy is indirect corrective feedback. It is when teacher indicates the errors without providing the correction. Teacher can either indicate and locate the error, or only indicate the error. There is no direct revision from the teacher about the students' writing.

Indirect corrective feedback allows students to process the information, interpret the meaning and perform to produce writing after a process of self-synthesizing. The result is a rather long-term memory about the language knowledge. Meanwhile, meta-linguistic feedback suggests teacher to use meta-linguistic clues as to the nature of the errors. The teacher can number the errors in the writing and write a grammatical description for each numbered error at the bottom of the page. In addition, electronic feedback enables teachers indicate errors and give hyperlink to a concordance file that provides. The last is reformulation. In reformulation, teacher uses native speaker to respond to the students' writing to make the language as native as possible while keeping the originality of the content.

B. Feedback on Form vs Feedback on Content

Feedback on form has different situation with feedback on content. J. Bitchener [1] stated that feedback on content is more likely to be problematic than feedback on form. He argued that feedback on content involves broader area than feedback on form, and sometimes it requires teacher to explain certain concepts which are difficult to be understood by the students. Research has demonstrated that teachers' feedbacks on content are often vague, contradictory, and does not provide sufficient guidance for the students to improve their writing ([24], [25], [26]).

Feedback on content may be very broad to cover. In small scope, it may be related to cohesion of the paragraph and also coherence among paragraphs. However, it may also be related to the area of study or field. It is common that the students have not been able to correctly develop the idea in paragraph because of lack of cohesion and coherence. Moreover, certain areas of study and certain fields should determine how a process or theory can be logic. So the process in explaining the idea should be well established. The outcome of situation is that students often become frustrated and discouraged and consequently ignore the comments, a situation which reduces the possibility of students improving their writing skills [27]. It is common that written feedback can discourage students in improving their writing. It is when the students cannot respond to the feedback well so that they are confused or even frustrated to fix their writing.

Focus of feedback will result in different writing improvement toward students' writing. H. McGarrell, and J. Verbeem [28] suggested that in giving feedback to the students, teacher should put priority for feedback on content over form because it is useful for the students to have more focus on the communicative purpose through writing. Therefore students can develop their writing ability instead of focusing on grammatical features. Content focused feedback will mainly consider how the students improve their writing so that the meaning or idea will be well delivered to the readers.

It is essential that teachers should focus on giving feedback because it will avoid students to be overwhelmed with too much input and correction. Therefore teachers should prioritize in giving small amount of feedbacks than overall feedbacks. By having the priority, students can be focused to learn the feedbacks. Students may expect that teacher will give them all feedbacks at once so that they can quickly finish the writing. However, it is almost impossible for the students to respond to all feedbacks well at once as the feedbacks may involve multiple aspects.

It is also important that students need to be involved with the feedback by actively being the part of the process. It will be useless if there was much feedback that teachers deliver but the students do not pay attention, process it, and act on it [29]. It is how the teachers make sure that the students understand the feedback and put effort on the feedback. The students' involvement may be in form of several activities. The teacher can have a feedback consultation so that the students have opportunity to ask or clarify the feedback. Moreover, from the feedback given by the teacher, the students can report their revised writing.

Good written feedback will benefit students' writing. D. Nicol [29] proposed several criteria of good written feedback. Firstly, written feedback should be understandable. It means that feedback should be expressed in a language that students will understand. Secondly, written feedback should also be selective. It means that the written feedback should be commenting on two or three things that the student can do something about. Thirdly, written feedback should be specific. It should point to examples in the student's submission where the feedback applies. Fourthly, written feedback should be timely as it is provided in time to inform the next piece of work. Fifthly, written feedback should be contextualized as it is framed with reference to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Sixthly, written feedback should also be non-judgmental. Seventhly, written feedback should be descriptive rather than evaluative focusing on learning goals not just performance goals. Eighthly, written feedback is balanced in which teachers point out the positive as well as areas in need of improvement. Ninthly, written feedback should be forward looking as it suggests how students might improve subsequent assignments. Tenthly, written feedback should be transferable. It should be focused on processes, skills and self-regulatory abilities.

C. Feedback as A Dialogue

The meaning of feedback comments is not transmitted from the teacher to the student: rather, meaning comes into being through interaction and dialogue [29]. Interaction and dialogue enables students to develop their understanding of the feedback as well as enables teachers to communicate the feedback to the students. Since feedback without communication and dialogue tends to be one way communication, teachers should make sure that students are given chance to have communication related to the feedback.

It is also important that teachers should improve feedback to be more meaningful. Meaningful feedback will effectively affect students' writing as it is relevant to the students' need. D. Nicol [29] suggested the steps to make feedback more meaningful. Firstly, teachers must address their feedback comments to students' needs. It requires teachers to identify the need of the students, even for every individual. It is because every student has different need and ability which requires teachers to know what feedback is suitable for the student. Secondly, teachers' feedback must be supported by feedback from other sources. It is useful for teachers to give feedback and supplementary source related to the feedback so that students can have access to the sources which are referred. Thirdly, feedback must be used to strengthen the students' ability to measure and comment on the quality of their writing. It means that students are involved to the learning and actively discover the learning itself. Lastly, teachers must try to create the conditions that

will give students motivation to actively seek and use feedback.

The best feedback that teachers employ should be adjusted to the level of students' understanding. The point is to match the feedback to the students' need. Students' need is crucial if teachers want to make students effectively improve the writing through feedback. Unfortunately, it will be difficult if the feedbacks teachers give deal with large number of students as the students may have different understanding, and are in different proficiency level.

Focused feedback is suggested to be used by teacher as focused feedback is more productive in gaining the students' writing than comprehensive feedback where teacher gives feedback on all types of mistakes [9]. It is very often that teachers give students numerous feedbacks more than students can handle. It makes students cope with a lot of things, and it result in students' stress and inconsistency. Therefore, when teachers use focused feedback, students can focus more on important details. Even though it takes time to cover many feedbacks, focused feedback is still more productive than non-focused feedback.

However, most feedback was direct and explicit [29], typically in the form of explicit corrections and deletions, similar to I. Lee's [50] findings. Correcting directly on local error is easier to do and cognitively less demanding because commenting on ideas needs more cognitive loads and plenty of time to do [29].

In fact, indirect feedback is believed to lead students into long term development. Indirect feedback is given without providing the correction to the students. It aims to give students opportunity to find their own discovery for the correct form. It is suitable especially for very typical mistakes. By the process in finding the correct form, students will have longer memory about the correct form. Whenever similar mistakes occur, students will easily identify the mistake and fix it. However, direct feedback is also useful especially for low proficiency students [30].

Duncan's [32] study found that most feedback focuses on mechanical aspect such as spelling and grammar, and many others are difficult to understand such as 'use more academic style' or 'do not describe'. Teachers frequently consider that academic writing should have no grammatical mistakes, so they may focus on grammar in giving written feedback to the students' writing. In fact, feedback on grammar does not significantly improve students' writing. It does not considerably affect the students' ability in making good academic writing. Besides, teachers' written feedback related to the content may frequently be difficult to understand. Content is sometimes difficult to express and teachers need to give feedback related to this. However, teachers' written feedback is sometimes unclear and too general. They often give suggestion and instruction by providing students with feedback using general language in which students may fail to interpret it because it is too broad. Therefore teachers should consider many aspects of students' learning when giving feedback.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This current study employed a qualitative research design. It aimed to figure out types of written feedback the teachers use for students' academic writing, the most useful feedbacks perceived by students to help improve writing, and students' perception about effective written feedback.

The participants of the study were five students of an English Education Department in a university in Yogyakarta. The participants were selected to those who were experiencing academic writing in form of undergraduate thesis as the requirement to get the undergraduate degree. The data collection method was interview. The instrument of the data collection was interview guideline. The data analysis included transcribing, member checking, and coding. The transcribing process included making the interview transcription from the result of the interview. Member checking was used to validate the result of transcription by having participants' confirmation. The researcher employed open, analytical, axial, and selective coding.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings are presented based on the emerging themes in the data. They are the types of corrective feedback, the most useful feedback, and criteria of effective corrective feedback. The types of written feedback involve all written feedbacks given by teacher that the students' experience. It also covers the use of those feedbacks and its function. The most useful feedback involves the feedbacks that the students find the most useful to improve their writing. It should be feedback that they have experienced. It also involves the reason why those feedback are useful. The third is the criteria of effective written feedback.

A. *The Types of Written Feedback*

The first finding involves the types of corrective feedback that the students experienced in writing academic text. The writing corrective feedbacks were given during the writing consultation. The types of written feedbacks involve symbols, note, and error correction

1) *Symbols*. This current research found that first type of written feedback was in form of symbols such as underline, circle, question mark, cross, brackets, and direction. The written feedback in form of sign or symbols is usually used by the teachers to mark the students' writing. The underlines are used to mark phrases that are grammatically incorrect. Circles are usually used to mark words, letter, or symbols which are not correct yet. Question marks are usually given in the part where teachers do not understand about the idea of certain sentences. Cross is to mark the words that should be changed or deleted. Brackets are used to give mark of the paragraph especially for a sentence or some sentences that students should revise.

In giving the feedback, teacher gave the symbols as the written feedback without in advance giving students information about the feedback. Most of the students had no idea about what the feedback is about. They gradually understand about the feedback after having consultation with the teacher. Some studies found that learners preferred indirect feedback with codes or labels ([31], [33]).

2) *Note*. The second type of written feedback was in form of note. The note is given to the students by writing words, phrases, or sentences on the students' writing. The examples of words used as the note were "V2", "revise", "What do you mean?" "Explain!" "Really?", "Elaborate!", "Start here", and "What is the main idea?". Some of the notes that teacher gave were easy to understand but some other were not. Other notes were difficult to understand because they are generally too broad such as "What do you

mean?", "Explain!", "Really?", "Elaborate!", and "What is the main idea?".

Feedback in form of note gave students information about how they should change their writing. Teacher gave instruction to the students on how to improve their writing. Some notes such as "V2", "Start here!", "Elaborate!" are among feedbacks that are easy to understand, and it helps students in improving their writing. However, some other feedbacks such as "Really?", "Explain!", "What do you mean?", and "What is the main idea?" are less useful as students cannot respond to such feedback quite well. They usually have no idea on how to revise their writing if they got such notes.

Written feedbacks in form of symbols and note have some similarities. They should be presented in a clear way and easy to understand. Symbols and notes which are too general and can be inferred differently will result in students' difficulty in responding the written feedback. A study by Crisp [34] found that students find difficulties in understanding some of teacher's feedback. Moreover, Walker's study [35] found that teachers often use terms, notes, or concept that students are not able to understand. There is no difference on how types of the feedback affect students' writing. Both symbols and notes will benefit students in improving their writing as long as they are clear and understandable.

3) *Error Correction*. The third type of written feedback is in the form of error correction. This is a type of feedback in which teacher gave feedback by correcting errors in students' writing. The error correction involves correction of punctuation, word choice, and verbs. This type of feedback is preferred by students as teacher directly gave the correct form of the writing. In this study, error correction that the teacher did was related to punctuation such as period, comma, and hyphen. It also covers to be whether it is as verb or auxiliary. The next error correction is related to the verb changes which involve several verbs i.e. present verb, past verb, present participle, and past participle.

In giving feedback, teachers are not suggested to do error correction. J. Truscott [36] stated that error correction was not only useless, but it also harmful. It is useless as it only allows students to know the correct form without letting them take the process of learning. It is also harmful as students may be too dependent to the error correction, so they have not enough effort to learn from the mistakes. Moreover, D. Ferris [37] stated that error correction is a result of the low motivation that the students had in revising their writing. Low motivation in revising the students' writing will affect to the type of feedback that the teacher used. To make sure the students, especially low motivated students to have progress in writing teacher often only give error correction. It was regarded to be the simplest way to give the feedback. Furthermore, J. Chandler [11] found that learners choose direct correction as the feedback of their writing. Most studies have found that error correction given by teachers to help students improve language accuracy compared with the absence of error correction ([30], [33], [38], [23]).

B. The Most Useful Written Feedbacks to Improve Writing

The next finding is related to the most useful written feedback that the students get to improve their writing. Three participants believed that the most useful written feedback was related to grammar. They said that it helped them make good sentences. Grammar is very typical and it is easy for teacher to give feedback related to grammar, even for direct correction. The data gathered related to the finding is presented as follows.

“I think the most useful feedback is when the teacher gives me correction about my grammar” (P1).

“I think that the most useful feedbacks that improve my writing is feedbacks related to grammatical error and the reason way I choose it because it help me to write the appropriate sentences with the right meanings”(P2).

“The most useful feedbacks that improve my writing skill is about grammar and how to develop the content. These two points are useful because it increase my writing skill” (P3).

Some studies found that students prefer written feedback in the form comments and content as well as explicit feedback on structural, surface, and grammatical error ([16], [26]). Unlike the finding, I. Woroneicka [39] found that students would rather feedback in the form of comment on content and ideas than on grammatical, structural and surface errors. In addition, Ravichandran [40] stated that students feel more motivated to engage in writing activities when teachers focused feedback of content rather than forms. Moreover, D. R. Ferris [41] stated that based on process-oriented approach, teacher written feedback should be focused on content in its early stages followed by form-focused feedback. However, a study by D. R. Ferris [41] found that students really appreciate form-based feedback.

Students’ different perceptions about the most useful written feedback may be influenced by several factors. The first factor is based on the students’ level of English proficiency. Low proficient students will have many grammatical mistakes in their writing. It makes their writing difficult to be understood by the readers. High proficient students will have relatively good writing skills so that they do not have too many problems on grammar. They will focus on the content. Hence high proficient students find feedback about content is the most useful. Another possible factor is the nature of its academic writing where students are required to make it by really considering to the grammar aspect.

The effectiveness of written feedback has been suggested to be mainly based on students’ preference ([42], [43]). Students’ preferences for certain types of written feedback will affect on how to use them for learning. If a student believes that a certain type of feedback is more useful than other feedbacks, he or she more likely to pay attention to it and use it for the learning, and she or he will treat differently to other types of feedback that she or he finds it less useful.

K. Hyland and F. Hyland [44] considered feedback as a social act which involved students who actively responded to what they experience as valuable and useful. It explained why there are different responses that students gave based on their characteristics and individual needs. Since that content-based feedback is recommended to be given, this current research found that grammar is the most useful feedback. It might be influenced by students’ characteristics and needs.

C. Students’ Perception about Effective Written Feedback

The third finding is about students’ perception of effective written feedback. The criteria of effective written feedback include the effective written feedback they had and experienced as well as the feedback they wish to have. This current research found that effective written feedback should be understandable and detailed. First, to make it effective, written feedback should be understandable as seen in these following findings.

“It is very helpful to have written feedback which is simple and easy to understand. I can respond to the feedback easily” (P1).

“In my opinion, written feedback should be clear. I mean it should be clear about what to be improved or revised. If I get written feedback which is not clear, sometimes I ask teacher about it in consultation session” (P2).

“I got difficulty to read the feedback if it is not clearly written or I didn’t get the idea of the written feedback. So I think effective written feedback should be clearly written and does not contain ambiguous meaning” (P4).

Understandable written feedback means that the written feedback should be simple and easy to understand. The effective written feedbacks should also be clear because they can help the students be easier in understanding the feedbacks, so the students can revise their writing based on the feedbacks given by teacher. Teacher’s written feedback that is vague and too general could make students confused, making it difficult for them to respond the comments in doing revision process, while too much criticism on errors could make students less motivated to revise [47].

Moreover, written feedback should be given by using language that students are easy to understand. The written feedback should be written in a simple and clear language. So it does not result in misinterpretation and contain ambiguous meaning to the students. Teacher frequently provides students with written feedbacks that students are difficult to understand as the written feedbacks are unclear or it has some interpretations. Duncan’s study [32] found that there are many feedbacks focusing on mechanical aspects of the task (*e.g.* spelling, vocabulary, and grammar), that many of the other feedbacks were difficult to be understood by the students as teacher often used feedback such as ‘use academic style’, ‘analyze!’ which are not clear and not understandable. Moreover, Crisp [34] stated that students often feel confused about the feedback they did not understand. A study by Walker [35] found that in giving written feedback, teachers often use terms or concepts in such a way that the student is unable to understand them, or they may make assumptions about the student’s ability that are not borne out in practice, or they may conflict with the student’s conceptions of the topic. In short, there are many ways in which students may not find comments usable. Effective written feedback should be clear and easy to be decoded and understood by the students ([46], [45]). Moreover, J.P. Agbyahoun [48] recommended teachers to use language that is accessible to the students in order to enable them to get most benefit from the feedback provided.

Second, another finding reveals that to make it effective, corrective feedback should be detailed. It was found from two participants.

“I really like detailed feedback as it helps me to improve small things such as spelling, grammar, etc. It really improves my writing” (P1).

“Teacher should give feedback in very detailed way. I was often confused if the feedback was in general” (P5).

The findings show that written feedback should be detailed. It means that the feedback needs to be addressed until the smallest part of the writing. It is to make the students easier to understand the instruction and know what they should do. T.M. Paulus [49] stated that teacher written feedback promotes students’ revisions not only in L1 but also in the context of L2 when the feedback given is more specific. Moreover, Ravichandran [40] claimed that teachers should attempt to create dialogue with the students through feedback as detailed and informative as possible that would allow teachers to reach out to the students better. J.P. Agbyahoun [48] also stated that students will gain more from a focused and selective feedback than from a comprehensive and overwhelming one.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the findings of the research, there are some conclusions that can be drawn. This study found that there are three types of written feedback given by the teacher. The first is feedback in form of symbols. The second is feedback in form of note. The third is feedback in form of error correction. Related to the second research question, this study found that written feedback about grammar is the most useful feedback perceived by students in improving their writing. Feedback about grammar is easy to understand so that it really helped students improve their writing. The last is criteria of effective written feedback. Based on students’ perception, effective written feedback should be understandable and detailed.

From the result of this current study, it is recommended that teachers should consider written feedbacks that are given to the students. Despite different types of feedbacks that may be given, teacher should make sure that whatever feedbacks given are understandable and useful for the improvement of the students’ writing. Moreover, written feedback related to grammar is useful especially for low proficient students. The last recommendation is that teacher should provide students with understandable and detailed written feedback to ensure the written feedback to be effective for the improvement of the students’ writing.

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