

Managing an EFL Free Writing Course: Students' Perceptions of the Course and Reactions to Teacher Feedback

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Abstract

This paper reports on an exploratory case study of how Japanese EFL learners feel about their teachers' writing instructions, including different types of feedback on their first and second drafts. A set of questionnaires asked about the students' general profiles, course expectations, and feelings about their teachers' feedback. The results indicate that simply commenting on the content of students' text can increase incentives for and confidence in writing; however, commenting on the content of students' text does not always contribute to an increased volume of revisions.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Since the output hypothesis (Swain, 1993), the importance of output on language acquisition has been widely recognized. In

particular, with the rapid advancement of technology (e.g., social networking services), the importance of writing has only seemed to increase. However, as Murakoshi (2012) reported, there remains an insufficient amount of support for EFL classroom writing instruction (especially in Japan), and many learners lack the confidence or incentives to write. This may be partly due to the fact that many secondary school teachers were found to lack confidence in teaching English writing to students (83.4%) or in writing in English themselves (63.9%). Therefore, the development of improved and context-sensitive EFL writing instruction, to alleviate learners' burden and lack of confidence in writing, would be indispensable.

1.2 Writing Instruction in Japanese Schools

Writing is considered to be a high-order skill, which usually takes a long time to develop. Foreign Language Activities (FLA) courses have been offered in Japanese elementary schools since 2011, and FLA will become an official subject from 2020 onwards. However, writing remains out of the scope of FLA at the moment. In junior high school, the focus of English classes is mainly on grammar; any writing instruction tends to address the production of short sentences containing specific grammatical items. Recently, more high school classrooms have allowed their students to write short texts. However, a large number of textbooks are still edited for a grammar-centered syllabus, and they aim to facilitate learners' acquisition of basic grammar. Furthermore, although more universities and high schools are incorporating writing assessments into their entrance examinations, the number of institutions currently doing so, and the amount of text required for these assessments, is still small. This means that foreign language writing is not an

imminent need for most Japanese students. Because of these factors, many students (including those at our college) cannot write appropriately. Even students who have some writing ideas cannot turn them into short excerpts of text. Teachers must therefore identify ways to help students overcome their feelings of inadequacy, in addition to addressing the problem of insufficient writing input and output.

1.3 Teachers' Feedback on Students' Writing

When we think about how we can develop learners' writing abilities, feedback is the first factor that comes to mind. Teachers and students assume that feedback is an essential part of instruction (Goldstein, 2004; Ross, 1982). Students at all proficiency levels also tend to ask for more written comments on their work (Lee, 2008). In fact, a considerable number of studies have been conducted on the effects of different types of teacher feedback. One such area that has attracted researchers' attention is whether feedback can improve grammatical accuracy. The most famous debate in this area started when Truscott (1996) argued that grammar correction is ineffective and even harmful. He also noted that non-native teachers were unable to provide appropriate correction, and that learners were unable or unwilling to utilize feedback. Ferris (1999, 2002, 2004) argued against Truscott's many claims (1999, 2004, 2007), and indicated potential positive effects of feedback, as well as suggesting that more research should be conducted on the issue. Indeed, accuracy is undeniably one of the most important aspects of writing. Therefore, it is important to take care of this area. One method of improving accuracy could be to provide comprehensible, corrective feedback on grammar.

In reality, there is conflicting evidence on the effects of

different types of feedback on writing accuracy. More precisely, the type of comprehensible, corrective feedback that works, and the aspects of learners' writing practices that feedback influences, have yet to be determined clearly. For instance, some studies support direct feedback (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2009), while other studies, based on the premise that learners have enough grammatical knowledge (Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008), claim that indirect feedback is more beneficial (e.g., Ferris, 2002). Chandler (2003) revealed that both direct and indirect correction (simple underlining) were effective, and that students preferred direct correction. Van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken (2012) also stated that comprehensive, corrective feedback is effective for developing both grammatical and non-grammatical accuracy. However, Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) argued that there were no significant differences between the effects of direct and indirect feedback on non-grammatical writing accuracy, including overall writing ability.

In terms of the types of comprehensible, corrective feedback, recent studies (e.g. Suzuki, Leis, & Itagaki, 2014) deal with the effectiveness of focused feedback containing grammar explanations; such feedback might be less of a burden for both instructors and learners to incorporate. However, as Aoki (2006) pointed out, this assumes that learners pay attention to the feedback that they are given.

Providing comprehensible, corrective feedback can be very difficult for non-native instructors (Truscott, 1996). However, Leki (1991) pointed out that the ESL students in his study showed great interest in having their errors corrected. Similarly, Ogawa (2015) indicated that his Japanese EFL students had a strong desire to have all of their errors corrected. These studies

may imply that learners' feedback needs are clear. Learners' needs should be considered very important factors in developing writing instruction courses. However, research focusing on how learners feel about instructors' feedback (including comprehensible, corrective, and other types of feedback), or the writing course they are engaged in, remains insufficient.

1.4 Course Design Considerations

Writing courses usually change depending on their contexts. In order to determine what to include in any course, it is crucial to analyze students' needs. Take feedback for example: student reactions are often influenced by the instructional context, and without understanding how students feel about feedback, instructors may adopt counterproductive measures (Lee, 2008). Therefore, in the writing course reported on herein, the following four points were taken into consideration. First, having students write without first preparing them does not support their writing development (Zamel, 1976)—thus, short pre-writing activities were conducted. Second, various types of feedback on content and grammar were provided, since Van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken (2012) reported that feedback useful in improving learners' writing skills should be adopted. Third, the treatment continued for a whole semester, because Brown and Liu (2015) claimed that it is unrealistic to expect changes in writing after a single treatment. Fourth, revisions can be an effective medium for improving student writing and they were thus incorporated into the curriculum (Oikawa & Takayama, 2000).

1.5 Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to reveal what an EFL writing course should include, in order to increase students' motivation, confidence, and quantity of text revised. We used an exploratory

case study methodology. In order to fulfill our aim, the instruction we provided was designed to include teacher feedback. A set of questionnaires was administered to evaluate our results.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 28 second-year female college students in a writing class. All were native Japanese speakers. Two students had studied English in the UK for four months, through a college program in the year prior to this study. Eight students had participated in a three-week study tour in the UK, which was also offered by the college. Participants' general English ability was relatively homogeneous due to the institutional placement test used to determine their class levels. The results of this test were as follows: the mean score was 69 out of 100 and the standard deviation was 2.08 for 23 students. Participants' proficiency levels were around a pre-2 level in the EIKEN tests.

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 Writing Topics

The students tackled six topics over 14 weeks in the first semester. The required writing was more descriptive than argumentative, so that the students could write about topics closely related to their lives. The participants in this study had little experience writing short texts. Therefore, topics that incorporated their past experiences, or topics that were relevant to the individual students, were deemed appropriate. It may also have been easier for instructors to have students practice descriptive, rather than argumentative or persuasive, texts. Descriptive texts based on personal experiences often result in

monotonous structures that may mentally burden readers. The topics that students addressed were as follows: (1) Let me introduce myself, (2) My hometown, (3) My best memory of a trip, (4) My special possession, (5) My special place, and (6) The person I most admire.

2.2.2 Questionnaire and Follow-up Interviews

Two questionnaires were administered—one was given in the first week, and the other in the 14th week, of the course. The first one was on the students' general experiences and expectations for English learning and the writing course. The questionnaire items were as follows: (1) What English skills are you most confident in? (Reading, Listening, Writing, Speaking, Grammar, None of the above)? (2) What English skills are you least confident in? (Reading, Listening, Writing, Speaking, Grammar, None of the above)? (3) What English skill do you want to improve the most? (4) What was the average number of English classes you took in your high school? (5) How often did you write in English during class? (6) Did you have any writing assignments during the summer and winter vacations? (7) Did you do regular free writing exercises in class? (8) Did you feel that your English writing ability improved through these high school English classes? (9) What would you like to be able to do through this writing course?

The second questionnaire focused on students' writing experiences in this particular writing class (including their feelings about the feedback they received). Some of the items were developed based on Ogawa (2015). This questionnaire contained the following items: (1) What English skills are you most confident in? (Reading, Listening, Writing, Speaking, Grammar, None of the above)? (2) What English skills are you least confident in? (Reading, Listening, Writing, Speaking,

Grammar, None of the above)? (3) Do you think writing skills are important and why? (4) Did you think the pre-writing activity helped you write? (5) Did you want your text to be corrected? (6) What error types did you want your teacher to correct (Grammar, Awkward expressions, Overall structure, Spelling, Punctuation, Japanese English)? (7) To what extent did you want your text to be corrected (All errors, Only grammatical points, 2 or 3 items, 4 or 5 items, A limited number of items if there are many)? (8) What form of correction did you prefer (Direct, Mark, Underline, Number, Margin, Rewrite) and why? (9) Did you prefer receiving comments on the content of your written work? (10) Do you think feedback on grammar motivated you? (11) Do you think feedback on content motivated you? (12) Do you think your text length in the second draft increased? If so, why? If not, why not? (13) Do you feel that your ability to write in English has improved? (14) Did you enjoy this writing course? (15) What was the average time spent on your first and second drafts?

A follow-up interview was conducted to clarify and confirm the information provided in the questionnaire responses.

2.3 Procedure

The class met once a week for 90 minutes. Most of the class time was allocated to tasks such as learning how to develop written texts through reading example texts or producing sample short sentences; this allowed students to practice sentence structure, organize paragraphs, format, create united and coherent paragraphs, structure descriptive paragraphs, and write example paragraphs. On average, 10 to 15 minutes were allocated to activities aimed at helping students write their first, second, and final drafts. The instructor talked about new topics and possible content for students' texts, as well as common

mistakes found in their first and second drafts. Students were also asked to submit their drafts from each class.

The first questionnaire survey was conducted prior to the course to provide a general description of the students. The students' actual writing occurred as follows: in the first lesson (Week 0), the instructor briefly introduced new topics and talked about what the students could write, and helped them think about their text content by asking questions or by consulting with each student. The students were sometimes paired or grouped when discussing topics, to stimulate their ideas and memories. They wrote their first drafts mainly outside of class time using computers, and were asked to submit them in the following class.

The instructor collected the first draft in the next class (Week 1) and provided written feedback, including (1) the instructor's personal comments and impressions of the students' content; (2) questions about text content or clarification requests intended to help the students write more; (3) clarifications and suggestions for better written expressions; and (4) grammar corrections (direct feedback only for topics 1 through 4, and a combination of direct and indirect feedback (underlining) for topics 5 and 6). However, instructors focused primarily on (1) providing personal comments and feelings on the content and (2) asking about the content or requesting clarification to help learners write more. Feedback was completed within two days of collecting the drafts, and the drafts containing written feedback were placed in a box at the front of the instructor's room. All the students were asked to collect their first drafts and revise them, and then, to turn in their second drafts in the following class.

In the subsequent lesson (Week 2), the instructor provided students with general comments on their first drafts' content,

common mistakes with corrections, and areas for improvement (using a handout). Students were allowed to consult the instructor about any questions they had, related to their texts. The next topic was also introduced at this time. After students' second drafts were collected, the instructor provided written feedback, including (1) brief personal comments and impressions on the content, (2) clarifications and suggestions for better expressions, if necessary (for the added text), and (3) grammar corrections. Again, drafts were placed at the front of the instructor's room for student pick-up. Learners were asked to revise and hand in their final drafts in the following class period (in Week 3). The students were also asked to hand in their first drafts of the new topics (from Week 1) in the Week 3 class.

The students therefore completed one topic, with two rounds of revision, every three weeks. This cycle continued for 14 weeks. In the final week, the second questionnaire was administered.

2.4 Data Collection

The results of the first questionnaire were analyzed to understand the students' general profiles. The second data source comprised the second questionnaire's results. The third source of data comprised the students' follow-up interviews; students were asked for confirmation and clarifications regarding what they had written on the questionnaires outside of class time. Five participants' data were eliminated because they were either absent when the questionnaire was administered or had not submitted any of the required drafts.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the results of the initial questionnaire, describing the participants' feelings about their English skills and learning experiences. Table 2 presents the results from the second questionnaire, addressing the students' feelings about English and this particular writing course, and specifically focusing on their writing activities in the course.

The preliminary questionnaire responses in Table 1 revealed the following findings. The two skills that the students were most confident in were Listening (39.3%) and Reading (30.4%). The two skills that the students were least confident in were Speaking (34.8%) and Grammar (30.4%). The skill the students most wanted to improve was Speaking (78.3%). Fifty-seven percent of the students had received four to six English classes a week in high school, and 82.6 percent had experienced opportunities to write in English at least twice a week. Few students had received writing assignments during their summer and winter vacations. None of them had regular free writing instruction. Just over 39 percent of the students had positive feelings about their English writing improvement over the course of their high school classes, and 30.4 percent had negative feelings on the same matter. The participants' free comments on the preliminary questionnaire question "(9) What would you like to be able to do through this writing course?" mostly fell into two categories: (1) "I would like to learn more about grammar," and (2) "I would like to be able to write my ideas easily using natural and appropriate expressions."

Table 1

Preliminary Questionnaire

Item		<i>n</i>	%
(1) What English skills are you most confident in?	Reading	7	30.4
	Listening	9	39.1
	Writing	0	0.0
	Speaking	3	13.0
	Grammar	1	4.3
	None of above	3	13.0
(2) What English skills are you least confident in?	Reading	0	0.0
	Listening	3	13.0
	Writing	5	21.7
	Speaking	8	34.8
	Grammar	7	30.4
	None of above	0	0.0
(3) What English skill do you want to improve the most?	Reading	0	0.0
	Listening	2	8.7
	Writing	2	8.7
	Speaking	18	78.3
	Grammar	1	4.3
	None of above	0	0.0
(4) What was the average number of English classes you took in your high school?	7 classes	1	4.3
	4 to 6	13	56.5
	2 to 3	9	39.1
(5) How often did you write in English during class?	Almost every time	9	39.1
	Twice a week	10	43.5
	Once a week	2	8.7
	Twice a month	2	8.7

(6) Did you have any writing assignments during summer and winter vacations?	Yes	2	8.7
	No	21	91.3
(7) Did you do regular free writing exercises in class?	Yes	0	0.0
	No	23	100.0
(8) Did you feel that your English writing ability improved through these high school English classes?	Strongly agree	2	8.7
	Agree	7	30.4
	Neutral	7	30.4
	Disagree	5	21.7
	Strongly disagree	2	8.7

N = 23

The post-course questionnaire responses in Table 2 revealed the following: the two skills that the students were most and least confident in were the same as those chosen in the first questionnaire, namely Listening (34.9%) and Reading (21.7%) (most confident), and Speaking (34.9%) and Grammar (30.4%) (least confident). Almost 74 percent of the students acknowledged that writing skills were important. Their written responses confirmed that 30.4 percent thought that writing could help them express their opinions or ideas to others. The remaining participants thought that writing was important because it would help them to speak. All the students analyzed agreed that the pre-writing activities were helpful. About 95 percent felt positive about receiving corrections on their text. Grammar and Awkward expressions were the error types on which the students wanted to be corrected the most. Over 78 percent of the students thought

that all their errors should be corrected. Almost 70 percent favored direct correction, while 21.7 percent favored indirect correction. Approximately 96 percent of the students preferred receiving comments on the content of their work. Almost 83 percent of the students answered that their motivation improved through receiving feedback on grammar, while 91.3 percent felt that their motivation improved when they received feedback on content. Almost 74 percent of the students did not feel that their text length increased in their second drafts. Just over 65 percent felt that their English writing ability improved. About 87 percent of the students enjoyed the writing course. The average time they spent producing their first drafts was 67 minutes; the average time on their second drafts was 23 minutes.

Table 2

Post Questionnaire

Item		<i>n</i>	%
(1) What English skills are you most confident in?	Reading	5	21.7
	Listening	8	34.8
	Writing	4	17.4
	Speaking	4	17.4
	Grammar	1	4.3
	None of above	1	4.3
(2) What English skills are you least confident in?	Reading	1	4.3
	Listening	4	17.4
	Writing	3	13.0
	Speaking	8	34.8
	Grammar	7	30.4
	None of above	0	0.0

(3) Do you think writing skills are important and why?	Strongly agree	6	26.1
	Agree	11	47.8
	Neutral	4	17.4
	Disagree	2	8.7
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
(4) Did you think the pre-writing activity helped you write?	Strongly agree	15	65.2
	Agree	8	34.8
	Neutral	0	0.0
	Disagree	0	0.0
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
(5) Did you want your text to be corrected?	Strongly agree	19	82.6
	Agree	3	13.0
	Neutral	1	4.3
	Disagree	0	0.0
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
(6) What error types did you want your teacher to correct?	Grammar	21	91.3
	Awkward expressions	21	91.3
	Structure	8	34.8
	Spelling	8	34.8
	Punctuation	10	43.5
	Japanese English	7	30.4
(7) To what extent did you want your text to be corrected?	All	18	78.3
	Grammar only	2	8.7
	2 or 3 items	0	0.0
	4 or 5 items	1	4.3
	A limited number of items if there are many	2	8.7

(8) What form of correction did you prefer?	Direct	16	69.6
	Using codes	0	0.0
	Underlining	5	21.7
	Indicating the number of errors	0	0.0
	Describing error types in the margin	1	4.3
	Reformulation	1	4.3
(9) Did you prefer receiving comments on the content of your written work?	Strongly agree	20	87.0
	Agree	2	8.7
	Neutral	1	4.3
	Disagree	0	0.0
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
(10) Do you think feedback on grammar motivated you?	Strongly agree	14	60.9
	Agree	5	21.7
	Neutral	4	17.4
	Disagree	0	0.0
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
(11) Do you think feedback on content motivated you?	Strongly agree	16	69.6
	Agree	5	21.7
	Neutral	2	8.7
	Disagree	0	0.0
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
(12) Do you think your text length in the second draft increased?	Increased	6	26.1
	No change	17	73.9
	Decreased	0	0.0

(13) Do you feel that your ability to write in English has improved?	Strongly agree	3	13.0
	Agree	12	52.2
	Neutral	6	26.1
	Disagree	2	8.7
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
(14) Did you enjoy this writing course?	Strongly agree	11	47.8
	Agree	9	39.1
	Neutral	3	13.0
	Disagree	0	0.0
	Strongly disagree	0	0.0
(15) What was the average time spent on your first and second drafts?	The first draft	67	min.
	The second draft	23	min.

$N = 23$

4. Discussion

According to the preliminary questionnaire responses, over 60 percent of the students had four to seven English classes a week, 82.6 percent of whom had some form of English writing experience at least twice a week. This is considered to be quite typical, in accordance with the government's course of study regulations. Though 39.1 percent of the participants said they had improved their writing skills through their high school curricula, very few of them had writing assignments during summer and winter vacations. Furthermore, none of them had experience with regular free writing exercises. This could mean that the students lacked adequate instruction or support in their writing classes. A majority of the participants described their typical high school writing classes as comprising grammar instruction and drills. With regard to skills that they were most

and least confident in, none of the students indicated highest confidence in writing, and 21.7 percent indicated lowest confidence in writing. Over 78 percent prioritized improving their speaking ability; this clearly demonstrates the tendency of speaking to outweigh writing, as discussed in Koike et al. (1985). Hence, overall, the participants were less experienced in writing short texts. Many of them hoped that this class would help them learn more about grammar, as well as how to write about their ideas appropriately and fluently.

In the post-course questionnaire, 86.9 percent of the students indicated that they had enjoyed the course, and 65.2 percent felt that their writing abilities improved. The number of participants who indicated that they had highest or lowest confidence in writing changed little. Moreover, although 73.9 percent of the students recognized the importance of writing, their written responses confirmed that only 30.4 percent thought that writing was important because it could help them to express their opinions or ideas to others. The remaining participants thought that writing was important because it would help them speak. Some even answered that they did not find writing to be very important, because there were likely to be fewer scenarios in which they would be forced to write, than scenarios in which they would have to speak. Hence, even the learners who thought that writing was important still emphasized speaking.

All the participants responded positively to the pre-writing activities. We did not confirm whether or not the overall quality of their writing improved; however, at a minimum, the activities helped the students.

With regard to feedback, 95.6 percent of the participants said that they wanted correction, mostly for their grammar and

awkward expressions; this finding reflects the general profile of the participants, who were not confident about grammar.

Furthermore, 78.3 percent of the participants wanted all their errors to be corrected, and the most popular form of feedback was direct correction. This result aligns with that of Ogawa (2015). In fact, some learners said that they did not know what to do with underlined errors, because they did not understand their errors, despite looking them up in dictionaries and reference materials. Ferris and Roberts (2001) argued that learners who were not proficient enough to edit their own text without assistance might become extremely frustrated if asked to edit their work using only indirect feedback. In addition, 95.7 percent of the participants noted that they liked receiving comments on the content of their written work. Lee (2005, 2008) argued that while less proficient learners preferred direct correction, high proficiency students preferred indirect feedback, including correction and comments on their work, and comments on content. One notable point is that the participants herein were not considered very proficient learners. However, 21.7 percent of them preferred indirect correction. In their responses to open questions, they reported feeling that although indirect feedback was harder to use, they could learn more from it, because it required them to think more. This finding could be interpreted as meaning that these learners were highly motivated. As Lee (2008) pointed out, the proficiency level is not always directly associated with students' motivation.

With respect to motivation, 91.3 percent of the participants indicated that feedback on content improved their motivation. Further, 82.6 percent also indicated that feedback on grammar increased their motivation. However, as Lee (2005) suggests, too

many corrections demotivate learners. Some participants wrote that they felt depressed when they saw many grammar corrections in red ink. However, they were also able to persevere, because they were encouraged by the teacher's comments on their content.

Regarding the length of text revisions, the number of words in second drafts did not change much. This means that the feedback intended to encourage the students to write more might not have had a strong influence on their text lengths. In line with this, although no one reported a decrease in text length, 73.9 percent of the participants felt that their revised text lengths remained unchanged, while only 26.1 percent felt that their text lengths increased. Students' comments revealed a possible cause: when the teacher asked for clarification, or suggested ways of writing more, they added certain amounts of text. However, the students' text often contained repetitive content and awkward expressions; thus, when the students corrected this, their texts became shorter, or more concise. Overall then, while the text length did not change in this study, the students at least accepted suggestions and tried to reflect them in their revised text. Finally, less diligent learners do not pay much attention to feedback, no matter how carefully it is presented (Hyland & Han, 2015). However, if we establish good relationships with learners, they accept feedback more readily. One way to promote the positive reception of feedback might be to use feedback that corresponds to students' personality and needs (Lee, 2008).

5. Pedagogical Implications

The participants' comments indicate that in order to manage an EFL writing course aimed at better assisting learners,

feedback should be included in the course's design. Modifying the type of feedback given may increase foreign language students' confidence and motivation, and facilitate revisions in text length.

Finally, students' questionnaire responses indicated that it was challenging for them to revise their texts drastically. Furthermore, the reason for which the time spent on first and second drafts differed greatly might be that the students used a computer, instead of handwriting. They rewrote their second drafts based on their first ones; this eliminated the need to retype entire passages, thus saving them time. Additionally, the approach of showing and explaining a list of mistakes to the whole class was not effective in enabling learners to notice their grammatical mistakes. This is because the students would not treat the mistakes as their own unless the instructor spoke with them directly. Truscott (1996) argues that it is a huge burden for non-native teachers to attempt to correct every grammatical mistake, and it is almost impossible for these teachers to perform in a perfect manner. Every ESL or EFL language teacher recognizes that providing feedback to students is sometimes a heavy burden. However, we found that the more time we spent being involved with the students, the more honestly they wrote; this makes the teacher's job much more enjoyable. Furthermore, as Lee (2008) argued, teachers should believe in their students' ability, in order for the students to succeed. Therefore, we should believe in students and consult with each one personally through written feedback to determine their needs, regardless of how difficult this task might be.

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