

## An investigation into Libyan Students' Reactions to Teacher Feedback on Their Essays

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### ملخص البحث:

الغرض من الدراسة هو البحث في كيفية تجاوب الطلاب الليبيين لتعليقات وتصحيحات معلمهم على كتاباتهم باللغة الإنجليزية. المشاركون في الدراسة هم طلبة ليين منخرطون في دورة للغة الإنجليزية لرفع مهاراتهم في الكتابة الأكاديمية. تم اختيار وبشكل عشوائي عدد 10 طلبة لإجراء مقابلة معهم بالإضافة إلى تحليل عينات من المسودتين الأولى والثانية لنماذج من كتاباتهم خلال الدورة. على ضوء نتائج الدراسة، عبّر المشاركون في الدراسة عن تقديرهم العالي للملاحظات معلمهم على كتاباتهم. ومع ذلك، فقد تباينت تفضيلاتهم وردود أفعالهم والصعوبات في التعامل مع بعض التعليقات وملاحظات المعلمين.

### Abstract

The purpose of the study is to investigate Libyan students' reactions to teacher feedback on their essays. The participants, who were attending a Pre-sessional EAP course at Nottingham Trent University, were asked to take part in this study to find out their general opinions of, preferences for and responses to teacher feedback and the difficulties they might encounter, and what they can do to get the maximum benefit from the feedback they received from their teachers. For the purpose of the current study, ten Libyan students were interviewed and samples of first and second drafts of their essays were analysed to find out how they could take up the feedback provided. According to the study findings, the participants reported that they highly valued the comments and corrections they received in their written products from the course teacher. However, they varied in their preferences for and responses to teacher feedback on their writing. Moreover, they reported that they encountered some difficulties in handling teacher feedback.

### Literature Review

#### Defining teacher feedback

Teacher feedback on students' written productions can be defined as an input provided by the teacher to students to help them make a revision of their written work. The feedback can take the form of corrections, instructions, comments, questions, and/or suggestions. (Flower, 1979, cited in Keh, 1990).

Teacher feedback can, thus, be seen as information provided to the student writers concerning some aspects of their performance on a written task in order to enhance their practice. Therefore, it is argued that the writer can realize and learn 'where he or she has misled or confused the reader by not supplying enough information, illogical organization, lack of development of ideas' or other issues related to the language used in the writing such as, 'inappropriate word-choice and tense' (Keh, 1990: 295). Consequently, there are two major aspects which teachers can focus on to provide feedback on their students' writing. According to Fathman and Whalley (1990), teacher feedback can focus on either form, for example, grammar, vocabulary and mechanical errors, or content which includes, for instance, amount of details and ideas.

It has been argued that a relationship should be established between the feedback and the revision which students are required to do. Teacher feedback should, therefore, be provided to 'facilitate revision by responding to writing as work in progress rather than judging it as a finished product' (Zamel, 1985:79). As a result, in order to make teacher feedback more effective, it is necessary to give students an opportunity to rewrite and revise their text after receiving feedback.

### **Students' reactions to teacher feedback**

According to many researchers who carried out surveys on SL students' attitudes towards teacher feedback in their writing, students tended to place a particularly high value on teacher feedback and believed that it helped them to improve their writing (Radecki and Swales 1988; Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994). Similarly, in a survey of 155 immigrant students who were enrolled in ESL writing classes, the majority of students affirmatively supported the idea of the significance of teacher feedback in improving their writing because 'it helped them to know what to improve or avoid in the future, find their mistakes, and clarify their ideas' (Ferris, 1995: 46).

In the area of study of student writers' reactions to teacher feedback, there is research on students' preferences for feedback they get from their

teachers. As Ferris (2002) points out, according to several studies, students tend to favour receiving feedback on language as well as on content. In this light, in a survey of a number of L2 university students' opinions of teacher feedback they received, it was reported that they preferred to get feedback on all areas of writing, including mechanics, language errors, content and organisation of their written texts (Leki, 1986, cited in Leki, 1990). According to a more recent study, Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1994: 157) found out that ESL students 'ranked grammatical features as important, but were more concerned with issues of content and meaning'.

The issue of students' preferences to get feedback on the content and form of their writing raises some questions about how well they can handle and respond to the provided comments and corrections. Ferris (1995) points out that when students are required to rewrite and revise earlier drafts, they tend to reread and pay more attention to feedback on ideas and organisation. While in final drafts, their attention tends to be focused more on reshaping the language and mechanics aspects of their writing. In this light, Zamel (1985) suggests that feedback on content is better given in early drafts and feedback on form in later drafts.

It has been argued that ESL writing teachers have recently become more aware of the importance of students' ideas and organisation of their texts. Therefore, when students receive suggestions and comments on content and organisation of their texts, teachers can then transfer 'these shifting priorities to their students' who will take such comments more seriously while they are revising and reshaping their written work (Ferris, 1995: 40). Moreover, Fathman and Whalley (1990: 186) found out that teachers' comments on content appeared to be an 'effective means of improving ESL students' writing' as they could improve the content of their texts when they rewrote them. However, it was argued that students tended to make many changes in the content of their compositions independently of the content feedback by comparison to their response to form feedback. In supporting this view, Ashwell's study (2000), showed that 12 and 43 percent of changes were made independently by students as a result of the form feedback and content feedback respectively.

On the other hand, teacher feedback can be given to students for the purpose of improving overall language accuracy in writing. According to some research, evidence can be found that students can make correct

revision for earlier drafts after receiving teacher feedback on their written errors. Fathman and Whalley (1990: 187) found out that, as a response to teacher feedback on form; students could correct all their grammar errors successfully and therefore, they 'made fewer grammar errors in rewriting their compositions'.

Accordingly, this leads to a related issue which concerns how much correction on students' language errors should be given. In some language teaching contexts, teachers tend to provide students with comprehensive feedback which is usually welcomed by most students. As in Lee's (2004) survey of secondary school students, it was revealed that most students preferred getting comprehensive error-marking. However, it has been argued that such expectations and preferences could be shaped by both teacher practice and students' previous experience which 'may not necessarily be useful for the improvement of writing' (Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990). Therefore, some researchers suggest that teachers should in turn 'intervene and change student attitudes' (Radecki and Swales, 1988: 364) because treating errors comprehensively can lead to a 'risk of exhausting teachers and overwhelming students' (Ferris, 2002: 50). It has accordingly been argued that when students were given comprehensive corrections on form in addition to some selective comments on content, with expected time constraints, their tendency to respond to small and local form-focused corrections encouraged them to assume that 'all errors were being indicated to them and that there were no more to look for' (Ashwell, 2000: 245)

In support of the notion of selective feedback and in her analysis of teacher's comments on 47 advanced university ESL students, Ferris (1997) found out that selective and minimal feedback on grammar and mechanics errors could have positive effects on students' revisions. By supplying form-focused comments at the end of the papers and underlining some particular patterns of grammar errors in the body of essays, students could respond successfully to 78% and 68% of these types of comments respectively.

In another but related area of research, Hyland and Hyland (2001) carried out a detailed investigation of techniques where praise and criticism were used in teacher feedback to six ESL university-level students. The study revealed contradictory results because the researchers found out that some students highly welcomed receiving positive comments from their

teachers. Other students gave less value to such positive comments as they were seen as 'merely mitigation devices' (Hyland and Hyland, 2001: 208). On the other hand, it has been argued that positive and negative feedback should be made available to students who need and prefer both. According to this view, teachers should criticize student's work in a supporting, friendly and constructive way; meanwhile positive comments can promote a good relationship between teacher and students (Ur, 1991).

The effects of positive comments are also apparently intended to encourage students in what they do well. Students' reactions can be seen in two different ways. Students tend to make few or no changes in their written works while they are doing revision as a response to teacher's positive comments (Ferris 1997). On the other hand, students' motivation, positive attitudes to writing and their reception of feedback can be increased by some encouraging and positive comments from teacher (Hyland, 2003). Accordingly, it has been argued that the lack of positive comments can be 'interpreted as negative feedback' which can discourage or even upset students, meanwhile, too frequent praise from teacher can tend to lose its 'encouraging effects' on the part of students (Ur, 1991: 254).

Apart from that, there is a growing body in the research which concerns the difficulties second-language writers might encounter and strategies they can use '...in order to derive maximum benefit from the feedback provided by the teacher' (Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990: 176). According to different studies, students do encounter problems in understanding their teacher's comments. For example, Keh (1990) pointed out that her students found some positive comments were ambiguous as whether they indicated content, writing style or grammar. Moreover, Raimes (1985) has indicated that second-language students, particularly those of low proficiency or writing skill, tended to use vocabulary and structures with which they were familiar and felt secure and inserted them into their texts. Therefore, they may 'resort to reduction strategies' when they were dealing with some writing difficulties they had.

Similarly, the lack of ability to understand some comments might force students to just delete the problematic words or replace them with simpler ones. This can have some dangerous effects on the improvement of students' ability to master creativity in writing (Kubota, 2001). Going further, it is not surprising that some students tend to ignore teachers'

comments when they do revision, simply because they may fail to interpret or handle them (Ken, 2004). In this respect and in his survey of 217 SL and FL student writers, Cohen (1987: 65) revealed that some students reported that they found some teacher's comments were difficult to interpret, particularly those which took 'the form of single words or short phrases'.

According to many studies, students highly value teacher feedback, but they have difficulties in making use of it. It is, therefore, suggested that it is important to encourage students to use 'metagonitive strategies', such as referring to grammar books and dictionaries when they are dealing with linguistic feedback. Such strategies enable students to be more responsible for their learning and be independent writers (Ken, 2004). Moreover, it is necessary to accompany teacher feedback with other supporting devices. For instance, as Ferris (1995) has suggested, students should be aware of and have background information about specific strategies, terminology or symbols used by their teachers. In this respect, teachers should not only indicate the problems with students' text, but also suggest some strategies which would help the student writer solve these problems (Ziv, 1982). Moreover, holding teacher-student conferences gives students an opportunity to ask their teacher for more clarifications and helps them to figure out the troubles (Keh, 1990).

To sum up, it should be emphasised that when teacher feedback does not have a positive effect on student writing, this cannot be explained only by referring to the feedback itself (Ken, 2004). Students' attitudes and reactions to teacher feedback can be seen as one of factors that can enhance or reduce the effectiveness of the feedback. (Radecki and Swales, 1988; Leki, 1990). It is important, therefore, to consider students' needs and preferences when giving feedback. Moreover, what students are expected to do as a response to teacher feedback should be taken into account as one of the significant issues to be investigated to find out how well they can utilize their teacher's feedback.

### **The study**

#### **Study questions**

Students can get feedback on their written work from either teacher or peers and it might take different forms, such as written comments and corrections, and conferences between teacher and student. However, this study dealt with written feedback provided by the teacher

on students' written texts. As a result the term "teacher feedback" was used in this paper as a reference to written comments and corrections a teacher writes in his/ her students' written products.

In order to be closer to the main purposes of the current study, there were four questions this modest work is trying to answer:

- What do Libyan students think of the importance of teacher feedback to improve their writing in English?
- What are students' preferences for teacher feedback?
- How do students respond to teacher feedback?
- What are the difficulties they might encounter and what do they do to get over these difficulties?

### **Participants and course**

10 Libyan students were chosen randomly to participate in the study. They all spoke Arabic as their mother tongue, their ages ranged from 25 to 40 years old, majors included English and non-English (business, engineering, computer sciences, etc...), and levels of English language varied from intermediate to upper-intermediate. They were all attending the Pre-sessionial EAP course in the academic year 2010 -2011 and learning English for Academic Purposes. The course was organised by Nottingham Language Centre to develop the students' language proficiency and the academic skills which they would need for higher university studies. The participants were from different classes which varied in their duration. Some classes lasted 10 weeks and others 15 and 20 weeks.

During the course, particular attention was paid to the writing. Students were required to attend integrated skills classes. These classes aimed to develop the academic skills the students needed in their studies at British Universities. One of the assignments students were asked to do was writing a homework academic essay (1250-1500 words) about a particular topic. Teachers guided students through the stages of composing the essay, getting ideas on paper, writing drafts and including references to other writers' work. Moreover, tutorial meetings were held between each student and his/her teacher to discuss the important issues

concerning feedback on their essays and to help students to utilize it effectively. The students were expected to rewrite the essay, taking into account the teacher's comments and corrections.

### **Research instruments**

First, it should be emphasized that the researcher understands that all the interview recordings and the participants' essay scripts are used for the purpose of this study only. Moreover, all the subjects are to remain anonymous.

The research was conducted by using two data collection tools: semi-structured interview and analysis of students' actual response to teacher feedback.

#### **Semi-structured interview:**

As a research data collection instrument, interviews can be used to collect factual information about the research participants. However, 'when the researcher needs to gain insights into things like people's opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences', interviews are better utilized in the process of research data collection (Denscombe, 2007: 174). Moreover, because of the existence of a direct contact between the participant(s) and the researcher in the interviews, there is a good opportunity to check the accuracy and relevance of data collected. Therefore, the researcher 'can elicit additional data if initial answers are vague, incomplete, off-topic, or not specific enough' (Mackey and Gass, 2005:173)

Semi-structured interviews are identified when the researcher has a particular agenda of questions and issues to be answered, however, an opportunity is given to 'the interviewee to develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher' (Denscombe, 2007: 176). Therefore, in semi-structured interviews the questions tend to be open and the answers are open-ended as well.

The research data collection process began with conducting semi-structured interviews with ten Libyan students who were selected from different groups and majors. Each interview lasted approximately from 25 to 30 minutes, was tape-recorded and conducted in either Arabic or English, depending on the students' majors (English or non-English). The participants were interviewed individually to discuss in depth their opinions of, preferences for and responses to teacher feedback they got on



the essays they wrote. The interview questions were similar to the ones used by Ken (2004); however, some changes in the questions were made for the purpose of the current study. (See appendix A for the interview schedules).

### **Analysis of students' actual response to teacher feedback**

At the early stages of the data collection process, the researcher collected copies of actual work written by the ten interviewed students during the course. An example of the assignments the students were required to write was a 1250-1500 word essay about a particular topic. The assignments were argumentative-type essays which should contain an introduction, three or four paragraphs as the body of the essay and a conclusion.

Each student wrote a first draft of the assignment as homework. All students were required to submit the first drafts by a given deadline to get teachers' corrections and comments. Each student was then given an opportunity to discuss the feedback on the first draft with the teacher and ask for any further clarifications in a 10- to 15-minute long tutorial session. After that, the students rewrote the essay and submitted the second (i.e. final) draft to the teacher who then provided each student with final comments and corrections on the essay along with a final feedback sheet which gave students an overall evaluation of their writing skills.

The main aim of collecting the students' first and second drafts was to make some analysis and evaluation of the students' actual responses to teacher feedback. Moreover, there was an attempt to make a comparison between their actual responses to teacher feedback and their answers to the questions during the interviews. For the purpose of the current study, the analysis focused on the feedback provided on sample sections which include the introduction, first body paragraph and conclusion of the collected papers to reduce the time needed for analysis.

The feedback was classified into a number of categories: feedback on content/ideas, language (grammar and vocabulary), mechanics (punctuation and spelling) and organisation and layout of students' essays. Moreover, some supporting quantitative data were made by analysing students' responses to teacher feedback on errors in language and mechanics. The analysis covered only the errors which were marked by abbreviations and symbols. Meanwhile the marked errors that disappeared

in the second draft because of rewriting sentences were excluded and students' responses were divided into three categories:

- 'error corrected': when student could correct the errors successfully.
- 'incorrect change': when student failed to edit the error marked by teacher.
- 'no change': when the marked error received no response from student in the second draft.

### **Study findings:**

#### **Semi-structured Interview**

The ten interviewed students said that they highly valued the importance of the teacher feedback they received. The majority of them justified their answers by pointing out the paramount importance of knowing their errors so that they could avoid them in future compositions. Some said

*"... it guides me to the right direction to write in English by recognizing my mistakes and trying to avoid them in the future..."*

*"...it is the most important thing... as English is not my native language, I will make mistakes and teacher feedback can help me to recognise them..."*

Moreover, one of them insisted that without teacher feedback, she would not be able to write even a sentence because of the absence of motivation.

*"...without teacher feedback, there is no motivation to write even a sentence... it will be useless to write..."*

Furthermore, others justified their responses by indicating that teacher feedback enabled them to realise their progress in writing and learning English in general.

*"... it shows my progress and weak points in writing..."*,

*"...teacher's comments can help me a lot to develop my ideas and improve my English..."*

In the meantime, when the students were asked whether they liked teacher feedback, the majority of them expressed their positive feelings towards teacher feedback because of the importance of it. However, some said that they were not sure if they liked it or not. It is interesting that one expressed a feeling of hatred of getting a paper covered with teacher's comments although he said that it was important. According to this

student, this feeling was because of the feedback showed too many errors, so that it would be impossible to handle them.

*“I hate teacher feedback... because it shows too many mistakes...although I worked hard to write my essay...”*

Concerning students' preferences for teacher feedback, despite what is mentioned above, all students said that they preferred to get all their errors marked and located by the teacher. Moreover, the majority of students said that they preferred to get indirect feedback when teacher used symbols and abbreviations and just underlined the incorrect forms. They said that it was crucial to think of and discover the errors themselves.

*“I preferred my mistakes are marked comprehensively even though that it might be frustrating...”*

*“...I think, when the teacher gives me the correct forms, this is not good for me as it is crucial to discover the mistakes myself ...to learn better”*

However, some responded that because of the shortness of time and stress they often encountered during the course, it might be easier and better to be provided with the correct forms. Some students said:

*“...I prefer teacher gives me the correct forms as there is a lot of stress and no enough time...”*

With regard to corrections on form in contrast to comments on content of their essays, some students liked to receive more feedback on language rather than on content.

*“...my English and writing in English need the support of native speakers...”*

*“...teacher feedback can help me in English language; I might disagree with her in the ideas...”*

*“I often have many ideas but I need the language to be improved to express these ideas...”*

However, the majority of students said that teacher's comments on all the aspects of the essays they wrote, including language, content and organisation, were important for writing in an academic style.

*“...I prefer to get feedback on everything as I have to improve my academic writing...”*

*“... content as well as language are both important to improve my writing...I prefer both...”*

Additionally, all students said that they preferred to receive some praise from teacher feedback. Most of them said that positive comments from

teacher were important as they increased their self-confidence, and encouraged them to work more to improve their writing.

*“...I feel being encouraged by my teacher when he praises me on what I do well, so I will try to do my best next time...”*

*“...I prefer to be praised as I feel more confident of myself...”*

On the other hand, some of them did not mind getting some criticism, which should be constructive to show their mistakes.

*“...I do not mind to get some criticism which should not be negative... it should be constructive... in some cases; I feel it is a kind of challenge...”*

*“...criticism sometimes guides me more than praise to write better as it shows the weak points which need to be improved...”*

However, some said that they hated to be criticised at all because they said that they felt upset and discouraged although they had been working hard to write their essays. Besides, no encouraging comments had been received by one of the students who expressed his desire to be praised even once.

*“...I sometimes get angry and upset when I receive criticism from my teacher...I feel that criticism destroys my self-confidence...”*

*“...saying the truth, I cannot remember that I have been praised, at least up to now...”*

When the students were asked about their responses to teacher feedback, all of them said that they paid attention to language, vocabulary, content and organisation and other aspects teacher feedback focused on. Meanwhile, they said that their attention to feedback tended to decrease and increase at some times depending on some factors. They said, for example, that they paid attention to teacher feedback on the first drafts of their essays more than on the second drafts as they were required to rewrite the essays. Furthermore, the majority of the students said that they needed more time to go through teacher feedback to get the maximum benefit from it as the shortness of time did not help them to respond effectively to teacher feedback.

*“...I surely pay more attention to the first draft feedback as I am required to rewrite the essay...”*

*“...because of many mistakes and the short time I could not respond effectively to teacher feedback...”*

However, some of them said that they usually did not ignore the teacher feedback on the second drafts as it showed their overall progress and they took teacher's comments into account in their future compositions.

*"...I look back to the second draft, when I have time, to see my mistakes which I should avoid next essay I will be required to write..."*

Finally, all students said that they encountered some difficulties in understanding some teacher's comments particularly on content. Although they did not state particular reasons for that, some said even if they could understand teacher's comments, it was sometimes difficult to handle them.

*"...even after I ask my teacher for more clarifications about some of his comments on content, I cannot fix them later. I really do not know what the problem is..."*

Moreover, some of them said that they could not often understand the handwriting of some teachers in contrast to the majority of them who expressed that they found teacher's handwriting was clear most of the time.

Despite all these difficulties that might affect students' benefit from teacher feedback, all the students said that they found that consulting their teachers for more clarification could help them a lot in dealing with teacher's comments and corrections on their essays. However, some of them pointed out that they could depend on themselves by looking at dictionaries and grammar books and discuss some teacher's comments with their colleagues. Moreover, some of them said that typing in the computer helped them a lot in checking spelling mistakes and finding alternatives for some vocabulary.

*"... I think it is crucial to discuss some aspects of the feedback with the teacher because I can get some more clarifications..."*

*"...I can ask my teacher if I have any difficulties, but I prefer to depend on myself to find out answers to my questions..."*

*"...I like to discuss some important points in teacher feedback with my friends..."*

### **Analysis of students' actual responses to teacher feedback**

Because the ten students were from four different groups, there were four teachers who gave students feedback on their essays. According to the essay samples collected, teachers tended to provide students with feedback on content/ideas, language (vocabulary and grammar), mechanics (spelling and punctuation) with some comments on citing

sources appropriately, using academic vocabulary, formal language and overall style and layout used in academic writing. The four teachers varied in their focus on these categories. However, according to the feedback in the first drafts of the essays, it was noticed that the general similarities and differences in the techniques used by the four teachers were:

- Some students' drafts were marked comprehensively by indicating and locating most of the grammar and vocabulary errors.
- Indirect techniques were used in providing feedback by underlining errors in vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation by using abbreviations. However, some teachers tended to provide students with the correct answers on the second drafts and sometimes in the first.
- Crossing out or underlining some incorrect, inappropriate and unnecessary words.
- Underlining the inappropriate ideas and content and writing some suggestions, questions and instructions which could be followed by the students to improve their essays.
- At the end of some papers, there were overall comments on the most important issues which should be taken into account when students would rewrite their essays.

According to analysis of some their actual responses, students seemed able to respond successfully to the majority of teachers' corrections on grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation. Moreover, the analysis of students' reactions revealed that in a considerable majority of cases, when abbreviations and symbols were used to mark students' errors, students could respond successfully to teacher markings: 81.4% of the total counted markings on grammar and vocabulary errors and 80% of total counted markings on spelling and punctuation errors. Meanwhile students made no change or incorrect changes in only 18.5% and 20% of total counts in locating language and mechanics errors respectively. (See appendix 2). Generally speaking, the majority of students' preferences for indirect feedback by using symbols matched, to some extent, their actual

reactions to this feedback as it seemed that they did not have difficulties in handling the feedback even though the teacher did not provide them with the correct answers.

Despite the bright picture of the students' ability to successfully correct the majority of language and mechanics errors, it was noticed that comprehensive marking can have a negative effect on some students' ability to pay attention to and correct all errors they made and might cause them be demotivated and discouraged. For example, one student said that he did not like teacher feedback during the interview because of the many mistakes it showed. This negative feeling could be seen clearly when a number of surface errors the teacher indicated in the first draft received no response from this student in the second draft.

During the interviews, while some students said that they preferred to get more correction on language errors rather than comments on content and organisation, the majority of them responded that they paid attention to and liked to get both. However, by looking at samples of comments on content and organisation, it was found that some comments received no response or were cleared up as an attempting to use a type of avoiding strategies.

It could be reported that what students said in the interviews about the difficulties in handling teacher's comments on content might appear to be reflected in their actual responses to this feedback in contrast to their responses to feedback on form where they could handle it in many cases.

As regards feedback on organisation and other aspects of writing such as layout of essays, there were not as many comments on these aspects as there were on language and content. It was found that these aspects did not receive as much attention from students as feedback on grammar and vocabulary. It was revealed that, in a number of examples, students did not react positively towards such comments. Apart from that, several attempts were made by some students to cope with the feedback on content and ideas.

Generally speaking, it could be concluded that students tended to cope successfully with teacher feedback on local errors and some important comments and global errors on content or organisation seemed to be a bit difficult to handle. However during the interviews, they said that they paid attention to all aspects the teacher feedback focused on.

## **Discussion**

Based on the research findings, the interviewees responded that they highly valued the importance of teacher feedback on the essays they had written. The current study findings were in line with what several surveys of SL and FL students' opinions of teacher feedback have revealed (Ferris, 1995; Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994). Moreover, as Ferris (1999: 8) has pointed out, teacher's comments and corrections on students' texts play an important role in students' 'motivation and confidence in the writing course'. Indeed, one of the current study participants indicated that the absence of teacher feedback could result in losing her motivation in writing.

In addition to this, as the course makes sense of the importance of rewriting a second draft of essay, it seems that students feel it is necessary that the teacher, who is a native speaker and knowledgeable about aspects of academic writing skills, to look at his/her students' writing and give them comments and corrections on their errors. This need tends to increase when students are unskilled writers and do not have previous and similar experience practising academic writing in English, receiving feedback and being required to do revision and rewrite their essays. Moreover, this might relate to some characteristics of the Libyan students' educational background. The students tend to place excessive weight on the teacher's responsibility for checking and marking students' work for examination-driven purposes.

As regards the participants' preferences for receiving praise or criticism from their teachers, the participants tended to vary in their priorities. However, some students said that they preferred getting criticism rather than praise. However, when a teacher focuses on all errors students made without any encouraging or positive comments, this can have negative effects on students' motivation. Therefore, it might tend to lessen students' motivation to respond effectively to teacher feedback as '...teacher's comments were all negative and that this fact depressed them and decreased their motivation and self-esteem' (Ferris, 1995: 46). Additionally, it cannot be ignored that many students assigned an important role to praise in giving them more confidence and encouragement in their new experience in writing. Therefore, 'praising what a student does well is important, particularly for less able writers...' (Hyland and Hyland, 2001: 186) and it is suggested that teachers'



encouraging comments, even if they are not text-specific, are better than not doing so at all (Ferris, 1997).

In addition, students' responses were more likely to support the notion that their errors should be better just labelled and located. For example, using abbreviations and underlining the incorrect forms, rather than corrected by teachers. In the current study, the participants' preferences were similar to those of the ESL student writers in Ferris and Roberts's study (2001) who preferred indirect correction with codes over other choices. This can be seen as an indication of the participants' awareness of the positive consequences gained from this feedback technique. Based on some research, it has been argued that students often prefer the teacher to indicate their errors and give them an opportunity to make the corrections themselves. As a result, 'students recognized that they likely to learn more and become more independent writers and editors... rather than simply copying and noting direct corrections the teacher had made' (Ferris, 2002: 32). Moreover, using abbreviations and symbols in marking errors can be seen as a system by which errors 'can be clearly defined' and students are encouraged to think and correct their errors themselves (Wingfield, 1975: 312).

However, when some students said that they liked to be provided with the correct answers from their teacher, this can point to such outside factors as time restrictions which they were not familiar with. Despite the difficulty of shortness of time, students' expectations might be driven from their previous experience, where teachers were responsible for their learning and had to correct and mark their mistakes. Therefore, it can be suggested that as 'learners' expectations are often shaped by teacher practice' (Lee, 2004: 302), it is important to raise students' awareness of the importance of taking more responsibility for their learning, which can be achieved over time and by continuous practice. Moreover, students should be advised and encouraged to edit and proofread their essays before handing them in instead of depending totally on their teacher to check everything for them. (Gulcat and Ozagac, 2006)

Moreover, the research findings revealed that getting feedback focused on the accuracy of language is most preferred and received most attention by most of the participants. This can be explained by the influence of the notions the students had about their teachers for being native speakers and having accurate English in terms of grammar and vocabulary. Moreover,

it has been argued that the SL students' views of the priority of language accuracy over organisation and the expressive qualities of their written products could be shaped by their teachers' response habits. ((Ferris, 2002).

Based on the analysis of samples of some students' actual responses to teacher feedback, students could respond successfully to the majority of teacher feedback on grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation errors. As it has been argued, language errors are usually easier for students to identify and correct than content problems (Keh, 1990) and inexperienced writers are more concerned about the language corrections than content issues (Ashwell, 2000).

According to some researchers, it can be suggested that feedback on content is better given in early drafts and feedback on form in later drafts (Zamel, 1985). In this way, the teacher can help in raising students' awareness of the importance of paying attention to content as well as form and help them concentrate on each aspect separately. Moreover, feedback on students' texts is seen as a complex procedure because it addresses different aspects of writing which include content, organisation, mechanics and language accuracy. Sheen (2007: 278) has emphasised on 'the importance of a selective approach to correcting students' written work' because 'corrections that address a range of issues at the same time may tax' second-language student writers' ability to process the feedback. Besides what is stated earlier, it is important to recognise that many corrections on form tend to disappear in later drafts as students remove some sentences and change the content of their essays where surface errors occur (Keh, 1990).

When students' responses to teacher feedback were analysed, it was noted that some students' essays were marked comprehensively by locating all language and mechanic errors. However, it is argued that when there are many corrections on form errors besides some comments on content and ideas, students feel that the work has been done when they spent most their time correcting surface errors (Ashwell, 2000). That is why it can be suggested that 'students should not be discouraged by over-marking' (Hyland, 1990: 285) because comprehensive marking can make students get frustrated and teachers suffer exhaustion (Ferris, 2002). Therefore, it is important that when teachers are marking students' papers, they should make a clear selection and distinction between serious and minor errors,

for example, the errors that interfere with meaning such as verb tense and confusing word choice, in contrast to surface errors which are less likely to interfere with meaning, such as minor spelling mistakes and article mistakes (Gulcat and Ozagac, 2006)

According to the research findings, some students said that they could understand teacher's comments, but were unable to handle them. As Ferris (1997: 331) found out, '...although the students appeared to understand from the comment that something was required of them, they were less clear about how to incorporate the requested changes successfully'. Students' inability to understand teacher's comments can be seen as an indication of their lack of strategies they can use to improve and revise their essays. Therefore, teacher's comments on content should 'address the strategies required to improve the essay and not just indicate what the teacher found lacking or interesting' (Gulcat and Ozagac, 2006: 3)

Moreover, some students reported that they had some difficulties in understanding teachers' handwriting; therefore, students might ignore these comments rather than trying to understand them. Furthermore, the issue of disagreement with teachers' comments was raised by a number of students as one of the problems they might face. It can be suggested that the existence of misunderstanding and disagreement calls for opening a useful discussion between students and teachers. This can be achieved by setting up 'collaborative sessions and conferences during which important discoveries can be made by both reader and writer' (Zamel, 1985: 97).

Additionally, holding tutorial meetings for discussing teacher feedback on students' essays, consulting for more clarification and asking teachers individually were greatly valued and prioritized by the participants. It can be suggested that teacher-student conferencing is a particularly useful technique to show students' errors in their essays (Gulcat and Ozagac, 2006). Similarly, Keh (1990) puts a particular emphasis on holding teacher-student conferences because they give students an opportunity to question the teacher directly on the comments and corrections they have difficulty with. Meanwhile, teachers might have a chance to check students' opinions and their understanding of the feedback. It is, thus, important that there is a face-to-face discussion between the teacher and each student on the feedback they got in their papers. Teachers, thereby, can 'gain an awareness of the student's perspective and an understanding

of what each individual student brings with them to the course in terms of past experiences and expectations' (Hyland, 1998: 280).

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

To recap, the current study revealed the following results:

- All the Libyan students who took part in the current study said that they highly valued their teacher feedback on their essays.
- They varied in their preferences for teacher feedback concerning receiving praise about what they did well and criticism about the errors they made, whether teacher should give them correct answer or just locate the errors and which was preferred most and thought more important: corrections on language errors or comments on content and ideas.
- They also varied in their responses to teacher feedback although they appeared to be more successful in editing the language and mechanics errors than responding to comments on content of their essays.
- Some students reported that they encountered some difficulties in handling teacher feedback. However, consulting the teacher had the priority for the majority of them to get over such difficulties.

The current study focused mainly on a particular group of students who had in common some similarities in their educational backgrounds, new experience in practising academic writing and getting comments and corrections on the essays they were required to write. Hence, the results cannot be simply generalised to other teaching contexts without taking into account some contextually effective circumstances. Although, it might be said that a small group of subjects were asked to participate in the study, it can be noted that some findings of the study were in line with other research in which different data collection instruments were utilized. In addition, the main focus of this study was investigating the Libyan students' reactions to teacher feedback on their essays. However, it might be better if a comparison were made between their preferences for and responses to teacher feedback and their teachers' practice and preferences. This could provide more insight into where the two sides could meet and how these students could cope successfully with the feedback provided.

Finally, the variations in students' preferences and responses can be explained by their gradual adaptation and being familiar with the new experience they had during the course. Moreover, as the analysis of students' reactions to teacher feedback mainly focused on sample sections of the collected drafts, the results could be limited to a particular stage in their progress and development during the course. Therefore, there is a call for further studies which can investigate particular groups of students' preferences for and responses to teacher feedback on several works and over a period of time during a full term or course.

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## Appendix A

### Interview schedules:

The interview started by asking each participant questions about, his/ her group, level, and previous experience in learning English, writing in English and getting teacher feedback on their written products.

- Do you like teacher feedback? Why? And why not?
- Do you think teacher feedback is useful and important for you to improve your writing in English? And why?
- What type of feedback do you usually prefer to get from your teacher? And why?
  - Direct (providing correct answer) vs. Indirect (symbols, underlining errors)
  - Corrections on form (language and mechanics errors) vs. comments on content and organisation.

- Correcting and locating their errors selectively or comprehensively.
- Praise vs. criticism
- Which do you pay most of your attention: comments on content or corrections on language and mechanics errors?
- Have you ever met any difficulties in understanding teacher feedback? And what do you do to get over such difficulties?

**Appendix B**

		Total markings counted on grammar and vocabulary errors: 54		Total markings counted on punctuation and spelling errors: 20	
Students' responses	error corrected	44	81.4 %	16	80 %
	incorrect change	04	07.4%	02	10 %
	no change	06	11.1 %	02	10 %