
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking Academic Feedback and its Impact on Writing

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ABSTRACT

Feedback plays a vital role in the development of students' academic writing, particularly in higher education settings where writing assignments form a key component of learning and assessment. Understanding how students perceive and respond to feedback can provide valuable insights into improving teaching practices and learner outcomes. This study investigates how master students in the English Department at Ibn Tofail University perceive academic feedback and how it influences their writing development, motivation, and confidence. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data on students' experiences with written, oral, and peer feedback and their emotional reactions to it. The results show that students generally view feedback as essential for improving their writing, especially when it is detailed, constructive, and clearly guides revision. However, vague or overly critical comments were found to lower confidence and make it harder for students to apply feedback effectively. The study recommends that adopting more dialogic and student-centered feedback practices can boost learner engagement and contribute to better writing performance within Moroccan higher education.

KEYWORDS

Feedback, Writing Performance, EFL Learners, Feedback Literacy, Higher Education.

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1. Introduction

The Feedback has long been considered as an essential component in students' writing development by guiding them to areas of improvement and encouraging reflection on learning processes (Hyland, 2003). In academic contexts, feedback assists learners to identify errors in their writing performance, refine linguistic accuracy, and detect aspects of their writing that require further development. Hattie and Timperley (2007) assert that feedback is information that leads to improved performance, and teacher feedback exerts a considerable influence on students' writing development, especially when provided within supportive classroom environments that foster learners to engage critically with feedback (Zahari et al., 2021).

Despite the acknowledged importance of feedback, various studies reveal a significant misalignment between teachers' feedback objectives and students' understanding of that feedback. Learners often find feedback too vague, overly critical, or poorly timed (Hyland, 2013; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Carless, 2015). Furthermore, feedback that is only limited to corrections often results in surface-level changes rather than more profound engagement with the writing process. These findings illuminate the complexity of the feedback process and the need for more refined pedagogical approaches.

Addressing these challenges, emerging research promotes the development of "feedback literacy", an approach that involves students actively engaging with and learning from feedback rather than merely receiving it passively (Carless & Boud, 2018). This paradigm shift requires rethinking feedback processes as a two-way conversation rather than a teacher-directed monologue.

Current effective feedback is increasingly characterized as formative, timely, specific, and reflective of individual learners' needs, moving away from traditional one-way transmission models toward more dynamic and reciprocal methods.

The present study situates itself within this ongoing debate by focusing on Ibn Tofail University master students in English department. It seeks to examine how these students perceive academic feedback, what challenges they encounter in implementing it, and how feedback impacts both their writing skills and their psychological engagement with the writing process. By rethinking feedback not simply as correction but as a dialogic and motivational practice, this article aims to contribute insights relevant to improving EFL writing pedagogy in Moroccan higher education.

Research questions

1. How do Ibn Tofail EFL master students perceive the role of academic feedback in their writing development?
2. What types of feedback (e.g., written, oral, peer) are considered most effective by students?
3. What challenges do students encounter in understanding and applying teacher feedback?
4. How does feedback influence students' motivation, confidence, and engagement in the writing process?

Objectives

- To explore Ibn Tofail EFL master students' perceptions of how feedback contributes to their writing development.
- To examine the difficulties students face when interpreting or implementing feedback.
- To analyze the psychological and motivational impact of feedback on students' writing practices.
- To propose pedagogical recommendations for more dialogic, student-centered feedback practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Types of Feedback

In writing pedagogy, feedback is typically classified into oral, written, and peer feedback, each approach having its own educational benefits and limitations.

Oral Feedback. Oral feedback, generally provided through teacher-student or class discussions, refers to spoken responses that elaborate on, clarify, or expand written feedback, enabling immediate exchange and collaborative meaning-making between teacher and student (Ferris, 2003). Based on dialogic and sociocultural theories of learning, this feedback approach enables learners to actively engage with their writing process, thus developing a deeper understanding of rhetorical strategies and revision practices (Goldstein, 2004). A significant advantage of spoken feedback is its instant nature, allowing learners to ask questions, seek clarifications, and receive personalized guidance that written feedback might not offer (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). However, oral feedback can be difficult to implement due to time constraints and large classes. To maximize its effectiveness, researchers recommend structured sessions and combining oral responses with written feedback to help students revisit and apply the guidance afterwards (Ferris, 2003; Goldstein, 2004).

Written Feedback. Written feedback, provided as teacher comments on student texts, is perhaps the most common type of feedback used in academic writing pedagogy. Ferris (1997) characterized written commentary as precise remarks aimed to enhance accuracy, structure and rhetorical effectiveness, offering a lasting reference that students can access during their revision process. Based on process-oriented approaches to writing, written feedback has shown effectiveness in assisting students to recognize their abilities and weaknesses while leading them through repeated drafting stages (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). One of its major advantages lies in its durability, as written feedback can be revisited repeatedly, unlike oral feedback, enabling self-paced reflection and helping students to implement the corrections thoughtfully. Research additionally reveals that comprehensive written feedback improves language accuracy and structural development, notably when it identifies both strengths and areas for improvement (Ferris, 2003). Nevertheless, issues remain concerning the feedback quantity and clarity, as some learners may have difficulty interpreting feedback or become discouraged by excessive marking. To tackle these challenges, effective written feedback should be selective, focused, and aligned with explicit evaluation standards, guaranteeing that learners can actively understand and respond to the provided comments (Hyland, 2013).

Peer Feedback. Peer feedback, a process where students evaluate and offer comments on one another's writing, is increasingly acknowledged as a valuable pedagogical practice in L2 and EFL writing classrooms. As a form of collaborative learning, this type of feedback encourages students to take active responsibility for evaluating their writing and fosters an extensive understanding of writing as a communicative activity (Liu & Hansen, 2002). This process enhances motivation and autonomy for many students, as they begin to perceive feedback not solely as teacher assessment but as an engaged dialogue that fosters confidence and reflection (Topping, 2018; Yu & Hu, 2017). Nonetheless, additional research identifies constraints in EFL settings where learners may exhibit limited linguistic confidence or feel reluctant to critique their peers' writing (Zhang & Cheng, 2020). Concerns about the reliability and quality of peer feedback also remain, particularly when feedback lacks guidance or structure (Hyland, 2000).

These issues demonstrate the importance of adequate training and scaffolding in peer review to guarantee feedback is constructive, specific, and balanced. Notwithstanding these challenges, peer feedback continues to serve as a valuable educational tool that shifts away from traditional teacher-centeredness by promoting collaboration, learner autonomy, and mutual responsibility in the writing process. Still within Moroccan tertiary education, empirical studies are limited regarding the implementation and reception of peer feedback, suggesting further research into its role within reformed student-centered approaches.

2.2 Students Perceptions' of Feedback

Students' perceptions of feedback are often affected by its clarity, relevance, and alignment with their learning expectations. Studies reveal both positive and constraining aspects of this dynamic. Carless (2006) points out that many learners find it difficult to understand teachers' written comments, especially when feedback is vague, ambiguous, or provides insufficient explanation. Remarks such as "you need to elaborate more" without specific guidance leave the students unsure about the improvements needed, lowering feedbacks' effectiveness. Conversely, research within particular educational contexts reveals that learners prefer comprehensive and process-focused guidance. Mamad and Vigh (2022) investigated Moroccan EFL learners and concluded that learners regard written corrective feedback (WCF) as highly beneficial, particularly when it prioritizes content and macro characteristics of writing, such as coherence and purpose, rather than exclusively on grades. Yet, their findings also uncover a considerable gap: whereas learners favor process-based and content-focused feedback, teachers often prioritize product-oriented approaches, revealing a misalignment between students' needs and actual teaching practices. Similarly, Sayed and Curabba (2021) indicate that students in the UAE perceive feedback not only as crucial for developing confidence and writing competence but also as a source of motivation, with over than 90% admitting its influence in encouraging greater effort. Notably, while all types of feedback were acknowledged, digital feedback received slightly higher preference because of its immediacy and accessibility. In sum, these results imply that despite students universally valuing feedback as essential to their learning, its impact and success are often weakened when it lacks specificity or when teaching strategies misalign with students' needs. This highlights a crucial gap: Addressing the mismatch between instructor feedback practices and students' preferences for clear and process-oriented feedback remains an ongoing concern in university-level writing instruction.

2.3 Psychological/Motivational Impact of Feedback

The emotional and motivational influence of feedback in writing instruction reaches well beyond its error-correction role; it fundamentally affects how students view themselves, approach assignments, and maintain motivation during the learning process. Carless (2006) emphasizes that as students devote a great deal of emotive energy to their assignments, feedback is both educational and emotional. The grades or comments they receive can either reinforce or destabilize their academic self-concept, affecting their readiness to use feedback productively. When learners view feedback as overly critical, vague, or evaluative, it may produce resistance or demotivation instead of stimulating reflection and progress. Alternatively, a feedback environment that is encouraging and emotionally secure can cultivate confidence and persistence. Zahari et al. (2022) determined that teacher feedback positively influences both classroom environment and writing performance, with the classroom environment partially mediating this relationship. A positive emotional setting enhances learners' engagement and facilitates the application of writing skills. Martínez (2021) additionally highlights that positive feedback decreases students' affective filters and enhances intrinsic motivation by fostering a low-anxiety environment where students feel empowered to take chances and engage actively. Besides the emotional context, the variety of feedback also plays a vital role in sustaining motivation. Through meta-analysis research, Cen and Zheng (2023) revealed that varied feedback, integrating teacher, peer, and automated feedback, has a more significant impact on learners' motivation than single-source feedback, since it presents multiple perspectives and cultivates shared learning responsibility. Such diversity strengthens learner engagement, autonomy, and validation, reducing over-dependence on a single authority (the teacher). Overall, these findings demonstrate that effective feedback practices should combine both cognitive and affective aspects. Nevertheless, a notable gap persists in the existing literature. While extensive research has emphasized linguistic correctness and error correction, limited studies have explored how emotionally intelligent feedback can foster motivation, resilience, and self-efficacy in writing development. Reframing feedback as both evaluative and dialogic can increase its developmental impact, transforming it from performance judgment into a tool for building motivation and engagement.

3. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative descriptive design using a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection tool. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Classroom to a total of 120 first- and second-year master's students from the English Department at Ibn Tofail University, specifically those enrolled in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Linguistics programs. The aim of the study was to examine students' perceptions and experiences with academic feedback in writing contexts. The instrument consisted of both closed- and open-ended items and was organized into four main sections. The first section collected background information about participants, including their gender, age, academic program, and level. The second section

explored students' feedback experiences such as the frequency of feedback received or provided, the types of feedback encountered, and their satisfaction levels using a five-point scale ranging from never to always. The third section investigated students' perceptions of feedback effectiveness through a series of Likert-scale items ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, focusing on aspects such as clarity, usefulness, and contribution to writing improvement. The fourth section examined the psychological impact of feedback, also using a Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree, to assess its effects on motivation, confidence, and writing-related anxiety. Finally, two additional open-ended questions invited participants to indicate their preferred types of feedback and the main difficulties they faced when interpreting or applying feedback in their writing process.

4. Results\Discussion

The data were analyzed descriptively and organized according to the four main themes of the questionnaire. For brevity, this section presents a summary of the key findings from each theme, accompanied by selected charts that illustrate the most representative trends.

4.1 Background Information

The first section of the questionnaire collected background information on participants, including gender, age, academic level, and program of study. The data revealed that the sample was predominantly female 63.2%, with males representing 36.8% of respondents. In terms of age distribution, 44.7% of students were between 20 and 25 years old, 21.1% between 26 and 30, and 34.2% were above 30 years old. As for academic specialization, 56.8% of participants were enrolled in the Linguistics program, while 43.2% were pursuing TEFL. The majority of respondents 81.1% were second-year Master's students, whereas 18.9% were in their first year. These demographic characteristics indicate a relatively diverse yet balanced sample in terms of gender, age, and academic background, providing a solid basis for interpreting subsequent findings.

4.2 Students' Feedback Experiences

Figure 1 illustrates that students' experiences with academic feedback revealed generally positive engagement. Most respondents reported that they often or sometimes receive feedback on their writing assignments, confirming that feedback remains a regular element of their learning process. Nevertheless, only a small proportion reported always receiving it, implying that feedback frequency is not entirely consistent. Peer feedback, on the other hand, appeared limited, as many students acknowledged that they rarely provided feedback on their classmates' compositions. This may reflect teachers' hesitation to assign peer review tasks because of students' limited linguistic proficiency, which can raise concerns about the reliability of peer comments. These observations correspond with Zhang and Cheng (2020) findings, which demonstrate that learners' reluctance to critique peers and teachers' doubts about their linguistic readiness can undermine the effectiveness of peer feedback. To enhance its value, scholars advocate for pedagogical interventions such as peer-feedback training, structured rubrics, and scaffolded review frameworks (Yu & Lee, 2015).

SECTION B. Feedback Experiences Please indicate your experience with each statement.

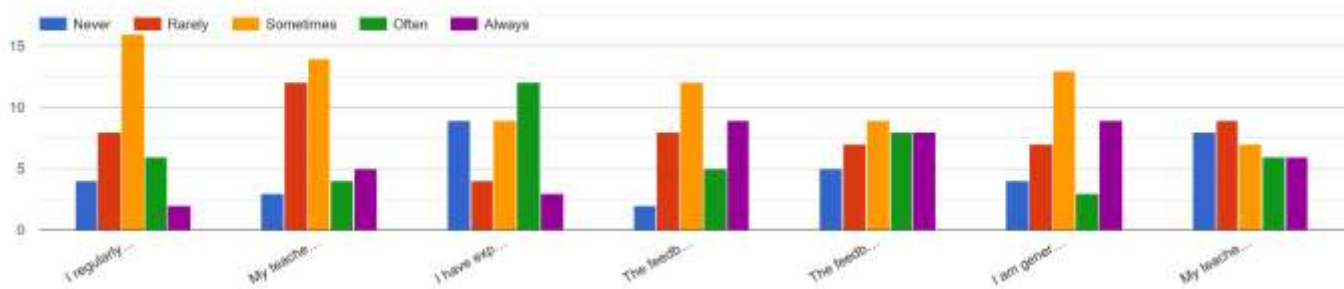


Figure 1. Students' Feedback Experiences

Another notable finding involves the lack of teacher–student dialogue during feedback exchange. Many respondents reported that teachers rarely encourage them to pose follow-up questions or seek clarification about the comments they receive. This indicates that feedback in this context is mainly one-sided and evaluative rather than dialogic. Fostering more interactive feedback practices could enable students to better understand teachers' comments, reflect on their progress, and develop greater responsibility for their writing improvement.

4.3 Students' Perceptions of Feedback Effectiveness

As presented in Figure 2, most students expressed positive perceptions of feedback effectiveness. The majority agreed or strongly agreed that feedback improves their overall writing performance and that constructive comments motivate them to write more effectively. Participants also showed a clear preference for feedback that combines both form and content, validating the importance of balanced guidance that addresses grammatical accuracy as well as ideas and structure. Written feedback was generally perceived as clearer and more beneficial than oral comments, though several respondents noted difficulties in understanding certain teacher remarks. This finding supports Carless (2006), who found that students often struggle to interpret feedback when it is vague or lacks explicit direction for improvement.

SECTION C. Perceptions of Feedback Effectiveness

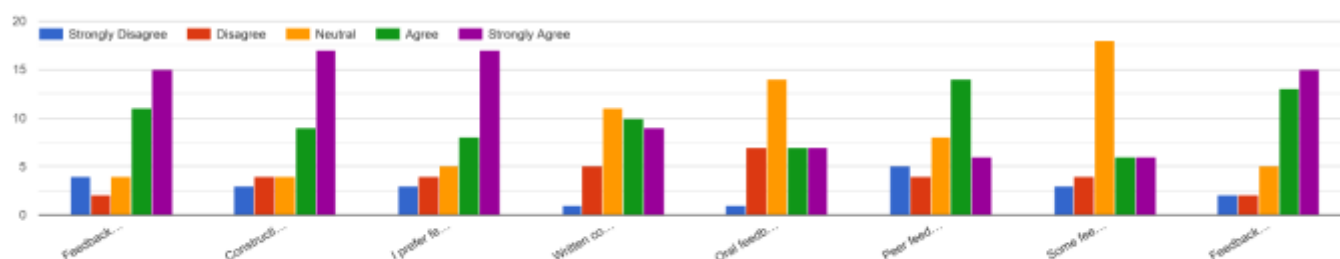


Figure 2. Students' Perceptions of Feedback Effectiveness

Furthermore, responses revealed a strong desire for detailed and explanatory feedback, indicating that students appreciate guidance that both identifies errors and clarifies improvement strategies. This pattern supports the rationale for a shift toward process-based feedback, where dialogue and continuous guidance replace one-time evaluative feedback. Such an approach resonates with Mamad and Vigh (2022), who stress that feedback should be framed as a progressive developmental process that supports learners' growth across multiple stages of writing rather than a conclusive assessment on a finished product.

4.4 Psychological Impact of Feedback

Figure 3 displays students' emotional and motivational responses to the feedback they receive on their writing. The results reveal that most participants felt more motivated when feedback was detailed, clear, and explanatory, demonstrating that constructive comments help students engage more confidently with the revision process. Conversely, a considerable number reported that vague or overly critical feedback negatively affected their motivation and heightened their anxiety about writing performance. These patterns highlight that feedback is not only a cognitive or pedagogical tool but also an emotional experience that shapes how students perceive their own competence. As Carless (2006) emphasizes, learners invest significant affective energy in their written work, and the comments or grades they receive can either affirm or threaten their self-concept, affecting their readiness to act upon feedback. Therefore, supportive and well-articulated feedback plays a crucial role in sustaining students' confidence and encouraging constructive engagement with the writing development.

SECTION D. Psychological Impact of Feedback

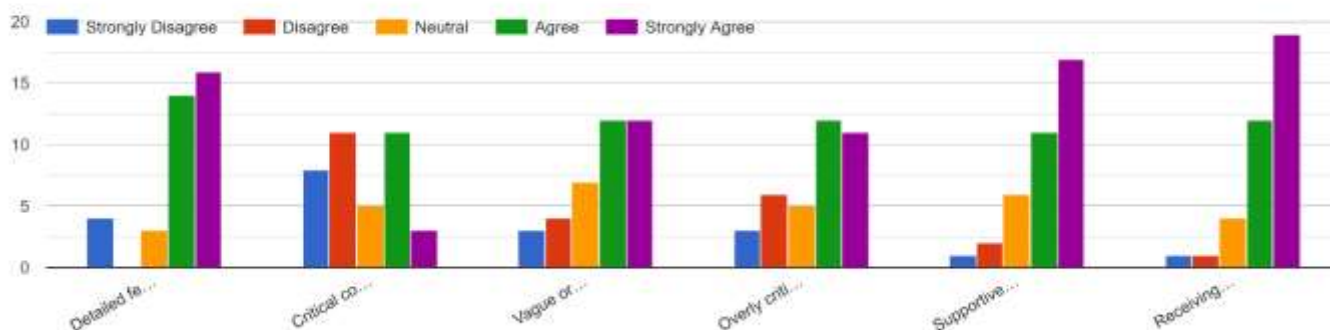


Figure 3. Psychological/Motivational Impact of Feedback

4.5 Open-Ended Questions

Responses to the open-ended questions revealed clear and consistent themes across participants. The words most frequently mentioned were supportive, written, constructive, and detailed, reflecting students' preference for feedback that is both encouraging and instructive. Numerous students preferred written comments for their clarity and permanence, allowing them to review and implement suggestions at their own pace. The focus on supportive and constructive feedback underscores learners' need for guidance that motivates improvement rather than merely pointing out errors. Likewise, the frequent reference to detailed feedback reinforces the necessity of explicit, process-oriented feedback that assists students in improving their writing performance.

5. Conclusion

This study focused on master's students' perceptions and experiences of academic feedback in writing, highlighting their reception, interpretation, and emotional response to feedback practices. The findings revealed that while feedback is regularly provided and generally valued, it often remains teacher-centered with limited opportunities for dialogue or peer engagement. Students expressed a strong preference for written, detailed, and supportive feedback that clearly explains how to improve their writing, emphasizing the need for more process-oriented and emotionally sensitive approaches. These findings highlight the dual pedagogical and affective nature of feedback, suggesting that rethinking feedback as a collaborative and developmental process can enhance both writing performance and learner motivation.

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