Saudi Female Teachers' and Students' Understanding of the Role and the Importance of Feedback on Writing

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ABSTRACT:

*T**his quantitative study investigated Saudi female teachers' and students' understanding of the role and importance of feedback, the types of feedback Saudi teachers use and students' perceptions of each type using a rating scale questionnaire. The participants were 100 female Saudi undergraduate students and 20 teachers from one campus at King Abdulaziz university. The 100 students were recruited from three different levels (elementary, pre-intermediate-intermediate) based on a placement test conducted at the beginning of the year. The findings suggested that students value teachers' feedback more than feedback from their peers and that some types of teachers' feedback were preferred over others. Direct feedback, where teachers underline or circle the error and provide the correct word or structure is found to be the most effective type of feedback from both groups of participants. There was a variety of responses on what writing features are more important to receive feedback on; for instance, two groups of participants, elementary and intermediate level students, rated feedback on grammatical errors as the most helpful. However, for the pre-intermediate level, feedback on spelling errors came first. The results of this study suggest that teachers should vary their feedback practices and consider students' perspectives and needs.*

INTRODUCTION:

The increasing spread of English and the need for communication in English in the world have led to a revolution in the field of writing English as a second language (L2). Choi (2013) maintained that "L2 writing is a more complex discipline involving composition as well as L2 language learning"(p. 188). Feedback is one form of assistance that students can use to improve their writing accuracy (McGrath, Taylor, &Pychyl, 2011). Winne and Butler (1994) contended that "feedback is information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite,

tune, or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, meta-cognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and tasks, or cognitive, tactics and strategies" (p. 5740).

Feedback in the Saudi Context:

In the Saudi context, English writing is very difficult for Saudi university students due to the huge jump from basic writing skills (that are measured by grammar and spelling accuracy in high school) to the more advanced written communication skills required at the university level (Aljafen, 2013). However, the preparatory year is established as a way to bridge the gap between students' high school English education and the level of proficiency needed for the university level (Aljafen, 2013; Al-Hazmi &Scholfield, 2007).Unfortunately, the number of studies that discussed the importance of using different types of feedback and students' perceptions of feedback in Saudi context is very limited. These studies include: Garmi (2005), which was intended to elicit students' opinions about the importance and the effectiveness of teacher feedback; Al-Hazmi & Scholfield (2007), that focuses on the effect of using enforced revision with a checklist and peer feedback in EFL writing; Mustafa (2011), that was conducted to capture students' perceptions about the feedback they receive and what constitutes helpful feedback; Hamouda (2011), that aimed to identify the problems that Saudi teachers and students encounter through the feedback process. The results of these studies varied to some extent; for example: Garmi (2005) reported that Saudi students appreciate and apply corrections they get from their teachers, whereas Mustafa's (2011) study revealed that Saudi students do not value feedback . Moreover, the type of feedback they want is significantly different from what they receive. As mentioned earlier there are few studies about feedback in the Saudi context, especially female teachers and students. Therefore, this study is designed to explore the views of Saudi female teachers and students about the role and importance of feedback, teachers' current practices, and

students' preferences. The quantitative questionnaire of this study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the Saudi female teachers' understanding of the role and importance of feedback?
2. What are the Saudi female students'' understanding of the role and importance of feedback?
3. What types of feedback do female Saudi teachers use?
4. How do female students perceive each type of feedback?

Sources of Feedback:

The question of *Who is responsible for giving effective feedback?* can be seen as an easy one; however, an extensive amount of work has been published about several sources of feedback including: teachers, peers, friends, tutors or writing centers (Simpson, 2006; Sugita, 2006; Liu and Hansan, 2005 and Ellis, 2009). The written feedback is a common method used by instructors and teaching assistants to help students to understand more about their weakness and strength points in writing assignments (Simpson, 2006). Teaches' feedback is still the most preferred type of feedback among L2 writers, even when they were provided with the appropriate training to use other sources of feedback including: friends, roommates, and writing center tutors (Garmi, 2004; Eksi, 2012; Séror, 2011).

Teacher Feedback:

It is widely known that the teacher feedback is the most trusted among L2 writers. Teachers use different ways to provide different feedbacks such as hand-written, electronic feedback, oral, direct, indirect, focused, and unfocused, (Sugita, 2006; and Ellis, 2009). Regarding this issue, teachers constantly ask questions like: What should we focus on: Language? Content? Organization? Should we use a red pen or another color? Should we correct all the mistakes or should we focus on one type of errors each time? Should we write the correct answer or should we just underline the mistakes? Should we grade students' drafts or not? Which type of feedback enhances students to make substantive revision? (Ur, 2012; Ferris, 2012; Casanave, 2012

&Rollinson, 2005). This part, therefore, examines a variety of feedback types, value of focused approach, and the teachers' comment types.

Apparently, the hand-written comments method is the most popular. For instance, Sugita (2006) investigated the impact of three types of teachers' comments: imperatives, statements, and questions, in developing students' writing skill. The study has revealed that comments in imperative form tend to be more effective and, eventually, lead to substantive revision more than questions or statements. Interestingly, students declare that imperative comments have provided them with clear directions on how to respond effectively to teachers' feedback without losing their feeling of authority over their writing. This notion was supported by Chandler's (2003) study entitled *The efficacy of various kinds of error feedback for improvement in the accuracy and fluency of L2 student writing.* Chandler pointed out that students' self-correction and underlining enhance their learning autonomy because they develop a sense of being independent writers rather than being passive recipients. Obviously, the above mentioned results clearly stress using more imperatives in giving feedback rather than questions or statements.

Yet, some researchers and teachers are still questioning feedback efficacy for L2 students' writing accuracy over years. While some researchers suggested that teachers should avoid overcorrecting students' writing, Simpson (2006) noted that some teachers feel obliged to do so claiming that they give students what they want and expect when submitting their work for teachers. Even though Hyland and Hyland (2006) argued that there are inconclusive answers on this constant debate, a considerable number of studies have explored the effectiveness of both common and less common approaches of providing feedback. For example, Ellis (2009) introduces five types of written feedback: Direct Correct Feedback (CF) and Indirect CF, Metalinguistic CF, Focused versus Unfocused feedback, Electronic feedback, and Reformulation. He pointed out that

direct corrective feedback is effective in helping students to eliminate errors such as grammatical mistakes in the second revised draft. However, there has been no sufficient evidence that they will avoid these errors in future work.

Thus, the teachers' feedback has a positive impact on students' writing, editing, revision, and rewriting. The studies of this part showed a variety of ways of giving feedback, subsequently a great range of perceptions on one method over the other. While some found corrective feedback is the ultimate solution for frequent errors, others found it discouraging. While some researchers think that teachers should correct each and every mistake, others argued about the benefits of targeting one type of errors in each draft. However, most studies focused on the importance of giving clear and timed feedback as if students do not understand teachers' feedback, they will stop trying to re-correct their errors. All in all, the studies revealed that there is no more "one size fits all." Having said this, teachers should use a variety of feedback strategies to help the students to learn better.

Peer Feedback:

Peer feedback, that is sometimes referred to as peer response or peer review, is the "use of learners as sources of information, and interactions for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor" (Liu and Hansan, 2002). Peer response is one form of feedback that is powerfully supported theoretically and empirically in the fields of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)/ English as a Second Language (ESL) literature (Rahimi, 2013). According to Liu and Hansan (2005), peer feedback if implemented accurately, it "can generate a rich source of information for content and rhetorical issues, enhance intercultural communication, and give students a sense of group cohesion" (p.31). Considering it as a valuable alternative to traditional ways of feedback, peer feedback also has several significant benefits including: exposing learners to a larger range of comments about their writing; allowing more space for interactive and collaborative learning; generating positive

discussion among learners and enhancing the sense of an audience (Séror, 2011). This notion is strongly supported by Rollinson (2005) who highlighted the benefits of peer review. He states, "It may be that becoming a critical reader of others' writing may make students more critical readers and revisers of their own writing" (p.24).

METHODOLOGY:

Participants:

A purposeful sampling was made of 100 Saudi undergraduate female students from three different levels (elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate) based on their grades in the placement test conducted at the beginning of each year, and of 20 Saudi female teachers with teaching experience that ranges from 2-10 years.

Instrumentation:

A rating scale questionnaire that consists of nineteen close-ended questions and one optional open-ended question was used for both groups of participants. Most of the items in this questionnaire are based on Ali (2011) and Susanti's (2013) studies with a few modifications to suit research questions and design. Other items were developed by the researcher, based on a previous EFL teaching experience in the Saudi context. The questions revolved around different types of feedback (Written, Oral, Grammar, Spelling, Punctuation, Vocabulary Choice, Content, Style, Organization, Direct, Indirect, Major, Minor, Feedback on the first draft, Feedback on the final draft). Teachers and students had two separate questionnaires with the same questions. The participants were asked to express their opinions by responding to the questionnaire intended using the Likert scale (Not Helpful at All 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 Very Helpful) (see Appendix A and B).

Procedure:

As this study was designed for participants at King Abdulaziz University , Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, one of the first steps to do this study was obtaining a letter of approval from the

English Language Institute at King Abdulaziz University, in which I work as a language instructor. After that, I got the approval from the institution's Vice Dean. The next step was recruiting the participants (teachers and students).Every effort was made to make sure that the students understood that they had to do to participate in the study and that not doing so would not in any way affect their position in the class and institution.

Data Analysis:

The data were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (Version 20 software).In order to answer the research questions and to determine whether there are any significant differences among the groups, one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance) was used.

RESULTS:

This part provides the finding of the statistical analysis of the data collected from the questionnaire. The data were analysed to answer the two research questions:

1. What are the Saudi female teachers' understanding of the role and importance of feedback?
2. What are the Saudi female students'' understanding of the role and importance of feedback?
3. What types of feedback do female Saudi teachers use?
4. How do female students perceive each type of feedback?

In order to answer the four research questions mentioned above, the researcher used descriptive statistics in which the mean and standard deviation scores were analyzed to see how the participants rated each type of feedback. The research questions were answered based on the participants' position (students or teachers) and students' level (elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate), the types of feedback teachers use and students' perceptions of each type. Based on the participants rating for all different types of feedback, peer feedback was found higher on the surface level errors (Total Mean= 3.93), (Standard Deviation = 2.334), and for peer feedback on the content (Total Mean=3.93), Standard Deviation =

2.069). However, none of the teachers' feedback types received a low mean except question (9) which examines the participants' perspectives on circling or underlining the errors only as (Total Mean=2.48), Standard Deviation= 2.000).The feedback practices were divided into five categories: a) oral and written feedback, b) feedback on the writing features, c) direct and indirect feedback d) feedback on the first and final draft, and e) feedback from peers.

Table 1. Students' and teachers' ratings for different types of feedback

Feedback type	Elementary		Pre-intermediate		Intermediate		Teachers	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Written feedback on students'	5.80	1.549	6.50	1.033	6.78	.428	6.45	1.191
Student-teacher conferences	5.64	1.881	6.76	.634	5.22	2.045	6.50	1.192
Correcting grammar	6.27	1.436	6.55	1.132	6.61	.850	4.80	2.353
Correcting spelling	6.16	1.462	6.66	.938	5.89	1.641	4.60	2.280
Correcting vocabulary choices	6.11	1.418	6.55	.891	5.94	1.349	5.10	1.889
Correcting punctuation	5.82	1.795	6.00	1.860	5.44	1.688	5.30	1.838
Comments on writing style	5.89	1.498	6.08	1.617	5.89	1.367	5.05	2.305
Comments on organization of ideas	5.61	1.807	6.13	1.339	5.94	1.474	5.65	1.565
Correcting the errors only by showing where they are	2.64	2.103	1.71	1.354	2.28	1.904	3.80	2.262
Crossing out the error and providing the correct answer	6.16	1.311	6.26	1.688	5.94	1.626	5.10	1.944
Showing the error and giving a clue on how to correct it	4.55	1.886	5.87	1.379	5.33	1.940	5.05	2.235
Crossing out errors and using codes for different types	4.27	2.084	4.00	2.337	3.94	2.508	5.80	1.704
Correcting errors mainly on the first draft	5.25	2.451	4.03	2.455	5.33	2.000	6.30	1.129
Correcting errors mainly on the final draft	2.93	2.276	4.34	2.374	3.61	2.227	4.65	2.183
Focusing on type of errors in each draft	2.57	2.214	2.47	2.037	3.72	2.396	3.60	1.930
Correcting with a red pen	5.07	2.150	4.18	2.437	4.33	2.521	4.45	2.395
Using supportive phrases	5.98	1.823	6.18	1.411	6.50	.985	6.85	.489
Using peer feedback on surface errors (grammar, spelling ,etc.)	3.64	2.363	2.87	1.848	4.33	2.449	6.20	1.196
Using peer feedback on writing style and content	4.27	1.933	2.68	1.526	3.72	2.052	5.75	1.773

Written and oral feedback:

As shown in table 1, the difference between the mean and standard deviation in the written and oral feedback was not a large one: for written feedback (Total Mean=6.27), Standard Deviation= 1.263), while for the oral feedback (Total Mean=6.07), Standard Deviation= 1.610). Still, two thirds of the student participants, particularly the elementary and intermediate levels, found written feedback is more effective than the oral one: elementary (Total Mean=5.80), Standard Deviation= 1.549) intermediate: (Total Mean=6.78), Standard Deviation= .428). Interestingly, teachers rating for both types (written and oral) were very similar, (M=6.45, SD=1.191) for written feedback and (M=6.50, SD=1.192) for oral feedback. So we can conclude that teachers believe that oral feedback is as effective as written feedback.

Teachers' Feedback on the Writing Features: Grammar, Spelling, Vocabulary, punctuation, Writing Style, and Organization of Ideas

There were four questions that were designed to investigate the students and teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of feedback on grammar, spelling, vocabulary choices, and punctuation respectively. Two groups of participants, elementary and intermediate level students rated feedback on grammatical errors as the most helpful with (M=6.61, SD= .850) for Intermediate level and (M=6.27, SD= 1.436) according to elementary level. However, for the pre-intermediate level, feedback on spelling errors came first with (M=6.66, SD= .938). Vocabulary choice was perceived as an important feature that comes after grammar and spelling, pre-intermediate level considered feedback on vocabulary very helpful by rating it (M=6.55, SD= .891), elementary found (M=6.11, SD= 1.418), and intermediate (M=5.94, SD= 1.349). However, it was interesting to see that the three groups of students perceived feedback on punctuation as the least important, whereas feedback on spelling errors received the lowest rating by teachers with (M=4.60, SD= 2.280).

Feedback on the Writing Style and the Organization of ideas

Feedback on the writing style had the lowest mean score by teachers (M=5.05, SD= 2.305) while the highest mean score was given by the pre- intermediate level (M=6.08, SD= .1.617). The pre-intermediate level has also rated the organization of ideas as the highest in all the four groups with (M=6.13, SD= 1.339), whereas the lowest mean score for the organization of ideas were given by the elementary level with (M=5.61, SD= 1.807).

Direct and Indirect Feedback

As shown in table 1, all four groups preferred *direct feedback* where teachers show the students where the errors are, and provide the correct words or structures as the most effective type of feedback. All participants rated direct feedback as follows: pre-intermediate (M=6.26, SD= 1.688), elementary (M=6.16, SD= 1.311), intermediate (M= 5.94, SD= 1.626), teachers (M=5.10, SD= 1.944). Among all the three types of *indirect feedback*, showing only where the error is by crossing it had the lowest mean score by the four groups, elementary (M=2.64, SD= 2.103), pre-intermediate (M=1.71, SD= 1.354), intermediate (M= 2.28, SD= 1.904), teachers (M=3.80, SD= 2.262). The second lowest mean score was given to showing the type of errors by coding. All the three groups of students rated it as less effective than showing the error and giving a clue on how to correct it. Conversely, teachers rated coding the errors with (M=5.80, SD= 1.704) while showing the error and giving a clue to correction was given (M=5.5, SD=2.235).

Feedback on the first and final draft

Three groups of participants have agreed that feedback on the first draft is significantly helpful comparing to feedback on the final draft. Teachers ranked feedback on first draft by (M=6.30, SD= 1.129), intermediate Level (M=5.33, SD= 2.000), elementary (M=5.25, SD= 2.451). Nevertheless, the pre-intermediate level perceived feedback on the final draft slightly more helpful than feedback on the first draft (M=4.34, SD= 2.374) comparing to (M=4.03, SD= 2.455) for feedback on the first draft.

Peer feedback on surface level errors (spelling, grammar, vocabulary and punctuation) vs. peer feedback on writing style and organization of ideas

As shown in table 1, teachers believed that peer feedback on surface level errors is more helpful than peer feedback on writing style and idea organization, pre-intermediate and intermediate level students have the same view. Their rating is as follows: teachers (M=6.20, SD= 1.196), intermediate (M=4.33, SD= 2.449), pre-intermediate (M=2.87, SD= 1.848). Yet, the elementary level students have a different point of view; they believe that they need their peers to provide them with feedback on the writing style and ideas organization (M=4.27, SD= 1.933) more than spelling and grammar (M=3.64, SD= 2.363).

Miscellaneous types of feedback (general praise, using red-colored pen, and focusing on one type of error in each draft)

All four groups of participants perceived the teachers' use of "general praise": phrases like: "excellent", "well done" or "great", as a very helpful form of feedback. Teachers rated general praise as high as (M=6.85, SD= .489), intermediate (M=6.50, SD= .985), pre-intermediate (M=6.18, SD= 1.411), elementary (M=5.98, SD= 1.823). All participants' perspectives of using red pen was similar to a great extent; the same is true concerning focusing on one type of error in each draft. Elementary and pre-intermediate levels don't think that focusing on one error is helpful as they rated it (M=2.57, SD= 2.214) (M=2.47, SD= 2.037) respectively. The intermediate level and teachers rated it slightly higher by (M=3.72, SD= 2.396) (M=3.60, SD= 1.930), subsequently.

To add to the credibility and the validity of the results , one-way ANOVA comparing groups was used. Among the 19 questions, there were 13 questions in which the variation between and within the groups was significant, (see Appendix C).The participants' ratings for each type of feedback were processed by SPSS. As mentioned before, there were nineteen questions about a variety of feedback types. Participants were

asked to express their opinions by rating the level of effectiveness of each type on Likert scale(Not Helpful at All 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 Very Helpful). In order to compare the mean scores of more than one group, a one way analysis of variance was carried out (ANOVA). ANOVA investigates the variance in the level of effectiveness between the four groups (elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate and teachers) (between groups) and the variability within the ratings of each type of feedback (within groups), as the table below shows:

Table 2. One way ANOVA of different feedback types

Feedback types		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Written feedback	Between groups(combined)	17.205	3	5.735	3.852	.011
	Within groups	172.720	116	1.489		
	Total	189.925	119			
Oral feedback	Between groups(combined)	43.164	3	14.388	6.298	.001
	Within groups	265.161	116	2.286		
	Total	308.325	119			
Correcting grammar	Between groups(combined)	47.067	3	15.689	7.176	.000
	Within groups	253.600	116	2.186		
	Total	300.667	119			
Correcting spelling	Between groups(combined)	56.950	3	18.983	8.186	.000
	Within groups	269.017	116	2.319		
	Total	325.967	119			
Correcting vocabulary	Between groups(combined)	28.021	3	9.340	5.049	.003
	Within groups	214.571	116	1.850		
	Total	242.592	119			
Correcting the errors only by showing where they are	Between groups(combined)	59.158	3	19.719	5.488	.001
	Within groups	416.809	116	3.593		
	Total	475.967	119			
Showing the error and giving a clue on how to correct it	Between groups(combined)	36.465	3	12.155	3.689	.014
	Within groups	382.201	116	3.295		
	Total	418.667	119			
Crossing out errors and using codes for different types (G- grammar)	Between groups(combined)	49.720	3	16.573	3.490	.018
	Within groups	550.872	116	4.749		
	Total	600.592	119			
Correcting errors mainly on the first draft	Between groups (combined)	74.276	3	24.759	5.009	.003
	Within groups	573.424	116	4.943		
	Total	647.700	119			
Correcting errors mainly on the final draft	Between groups (combined)	59.291	3	19.764	3.782	.012
	Within groups	606.176	116	5.226		
	Total	665.467	119			
Using peer feedback on surface errors (grammar, spelling,..)	Between groups (combined)	152.601	3	50.867	11.903	.000
	Within groups	459.724	116	4.273		
	Total	648.325	119			
Using peer feedback on writing style and content	Between groups (combined)	131.168	3	43.723	13.407	.000
	Within groups	378.299	116	3.261		
	Total	509.467	119			

As shown above, the F ratio is greater than three in 13 out of 19 instances. This means that the group means in those instances are not equal. That is, there is more variability between and within these groups .More importantly, the *p* value (sig. value) is less than .05 which indicates that there is a significant difference somewhere among the four groups. However, ''an ANOVA provides information on whether or not the groups differ, but it provides no information as to the location or the source of the difference'' (Mackey and Gass, 2005, p.275).

DISCUSSION:

The findings of this quantitative study confirm many of the quantitative results presented by Bitchener and Knoch (2010). Particularly, all four groups showed great preference for *direct feedback* in which the teachers show the students where the errors are and provide the correct words or structures for revision. Whereas circling or underlining the errors only (*Indirect feedback*) received the lowest mean score. As Bitchener and Knoch (2010) noted in their study, all the treatment groups improved their L2 accuracy through the direct feedback. Though, those who received indirect feedback could not maintain what they had learned. In correspondence with Lee (2008); Grami (2005); and Mahfoodh's studies (2011), two groups of students (elementary and intermediate) showed more interest in written feedback over the oral feedback. Garmi's findings indicate that the Saudi university students expect and value teacher's written feedback rather than the oral feedback. Concerning feedback on surface level errors, the findings of this study are similar to Ashwell's (2000) study in which he contended that students value feedback on form more so than the feedback on content. This finding also aligns with the findings reported by Diab (2005). In correlation with Lin (2009), elementary level students, (the lower achievers) rated feedback on grammatical errors as the most important among the other writing features. Lin (2009) argued that lower achievers express a need for feedback on grammar as they believe they lack grammar skills. However, the results of the current study

contradict Bitchener (2008) and Bitchener & Knoch's (2009) results that highlighted the significance of focusing on one or two types of error as a way of improving students' accuracy. In this study, none of the four groups rated this technique as an effective one. Overall, students in the current study valued feedback on surface level errors (grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and punctuation) more than feedback on the content or writing style and treasured teacher's feedback over peer feedback.

CONCLUSION:

Feedback is considered as an important strategy for effective teaching and learning and the development of ESL writing skills. It is an essential part of teaching writing to make students aware what teachers want, value, and expect from students as this will help the students to know how are they going to be assessed, what do they need to do to be successful and therefore have greater motivation and confidence to write. Although the feedback is not the definite solution that will help students to avoid mistakes in the long term, still it is a valuable source of writers. It is indubitable that teachers play an important role in students' attitudes toward feedback through their own feedback and through guiding the process of peer feedback itself. An extensive number of studies referred to in the literature emphasize the importance of raising the students' awareness of the benefits of feedback as well as taking context into consideration when providing feedback. That is said, there is no better feedback technique that is applicable in every context. Therefore, it is the teachers' responsibility to learn new feedback strategies, utilize new techniques, and take students' perspectives on the type of feedback that they find most helpful and which writing features they need to improve.

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