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### Written Feedback on ESL Student Writers' Academic Essays

Kelly Tee Pei Leng<sup>1\*#</sup>, Vijay Kumar<sup>2</sup> and Mardziah Hayati Abdullah<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Higher Education Development Centre, University of Otago, 65/75 Union Place West, Dunedin 9016, New Zealand

#### ABSTRACT

This paper provides an analysis of written feedback on ESL student writers' academic essays to shed light on how feedback acts as a communicative tool between the lecturer and students. The objective of this study is to explore the types and usefulness of written feedback on ESL student writers' academic writing. First, it discusses the importance of feedback and the theoretical framework of the Speech Act Theory. The data for this study comprises written feedback and students' interviews. The feedback was coded, and a model for analysis was developed based on two primary roles of speech: directive and expressive. Based on this analysis, the paper discusses the types of feedback from which students benefit the most, namely, directive-instruction feedback and expressive-disapproval feedback. The interview conducted as part of this study provided insight on how the students felt about each type of feedback. This study also suggests a possibility of developing a taxonomy of good feedback practices by considering the views of the giver and receiver of written feedback.

*Keywords:* ESL student writers, speech act, written feedback

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##### *E-mail addresses:*

peileng.tee@taylors.edu.my (Kelly Tee Pei Leng),

vijay.mallan@otago.ac.nz (Vijay Kumar),

mardziah@fbmk.upm.edu.my (Mardziah Hayati Abdullah)

\* Corresponding author

##### *# Author's current affiliation:*

Taylor's Business School, Taylor's University,

No. 1 Jalan Taylor's, 47500 Subang Jaya,

Selangor, Malaysia

#### INTRODUCTION

Feedback is essential in the development of a writer (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). However, it was not until the emergence of the writing process movement during the 1970s that greater importance was placed on revision and feedback. Researchers such as Emig (1977) and Flower and Hayes (1981) shed new light on writing as a procedure in which the focus is on the actual processes

of writing instead of on the product. This resulted in the notion that writing is not an end product to be evaluated in summative tests but is, rather “an activity, a process, which a writer can learn how to accomplish” (Lawrence, 1972, p.3). At this juncture, feedback is used as a type of formative evaluation to help writers to be aware of what they write and to evaluate their own progress in writing. Consequently, feedback acts as intervention and provides support and encouragement to writers to achieve their writing goals (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Since the early 1980s, researchers and reviewers have been investigating feedback in students’ writing (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Faighley & Witte, 1981; Hillocks, 1986; Ziv, 1984), and the focus of these investigations has been on the writing of high school students and undergraduates. These studies reported that written feedback provides a potential value in motivating students to revise their draft (Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994; Zhang, 1995) and in improving their writing (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Ferris *et al.*, 1997; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990). As a result, written feedback is the most popular method that teachers use to interact and communicate with students (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 2002; Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

It has been suggested by Straub (2000) that teachers should create the feel of a conversation by writing comments in complete sentences; by avoiding abstract, technical language and abbreviations; by

relating their comments back to specific words and paragraphs from the students’ text; by viewing student writing seriously, as part of a real exchange. Feedback is particularly important to students because it lies at the heart of the student’s learning process and is one of the most common and favourite methods used by teachers to maximise learning (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 2002; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). But, little attention has been given to the specific types of responses teachers give their students in relation to speech acts and the extent to which students find these helpful. Therefore, this study investigates the types of feedback and their usefulness according to speech acts which are directive or expressive.

### **IMPORTANCE OF FEEDBACK**

Feedback is important for the improvement of students’ writing and is loaded with information to help a writer improve and learn (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, 2006). In order for feedback to be effective, students must be provided with feedback that is focussed, clear, applicable and encouraging (Lindemann, 2001). Students are able to think critically and self-regulate their own learning when they are provided with effective feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Strake & Kumar, 2010). Naturally, students are expected to revise and amend their writing based on the feedback received from their lecturers. It is also understood that feedback acts as a compass which provides a sense of direction

to the students and informs them that writing goals are achievable.

Additionally, feedback has been conceptualised as “information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter gap in some way” (Ramaprasad, 1983, p.4). Feedback closes the gap between current and desired performance (Parr & Temperley, 2010). Furthermore, Sadler (1989) states that what is essential in feedback is that it has to be active in the sense that once the gap is identified, it has to be closed. This closure is then identified via feedback. Feedback is given to ensure that learning goals are met. Sadler (1989) supports this view by noting that feedback is “information given to the student about the quality of performance” (p.142). In a model of feedback proposed by Hattie and Temperley (2007), it has been emphasised that effective feedback closes a gap in knowledge. Hattie and Temperley (2007) use the term ‘feed up’ to refer to the notion of where the learner is going; ‘feed back’ to the notion of what progress is being made to achieve a goal; and, finally, the term ‘feed forward’ to refer to the notion of where the learner is going next. In a writing classroom environment, the teacher usually applies all three notions to ensure that specific learning goals are met.

Besides this, feedback provides developmental experience and encourages self-regulated learning (SRL) (Strake & Kumar, 2010). In a writing classroom, feedback is given during the writing process, for instance after the student has

completed his writing draft. Feedback provides opportunities for the student to practise skills and to consolidate the journey from a zone of current development (ZCD) to a zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), that is, to move from being a novice writer to becoming a proficient writer, and to achieve the tenacities of self-regulated learning (SRL). Thus, the main aim of feedback is to reduce the “discrepancies between current understandings, performance, and a goal” (Hattie & Temperley, 2007, p.86).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses a combination of three frameworks of speech acts which are Speech Act Theory by Searle (1969), Language Functions by Holmes (2001) and Communicative Functions by Jakobson (1960). Holmes (2001) categorised language into six language functions, which are: directive, expressive, referential, metalinguistic, poetic and phatic. Similarly, Jakobson (1960) categorised speech into six communicative functions, which are: poetic, referential, emotive, conative, metalinguistic and phatic. Likewise, Searle (1969) also categorised speech by its illocutionary acts and categorised these into five illocutionary acts, which are representatives (assertive), directives, commissives, expressives and declarations (performatives).

These three theories give a clear justification to classifying feedback as a form of communication between the provider and the receiver of the feedback. Using the lens of this stance, this study

suggests that providing useful and effective feedback based on the speech functions may essentially enhance the communicative functions of feedback. In order to provide effective feedback to students, teachers need to understand what types of feedback are useful in students' writing and also students' opinion of different types of feedback.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to explore the types and usefulness of written feedback on ESL students' academic writing and to discuss the different types of feedback that were given to the students. The questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What types and forms of feedback did the students receive in terms of speech act functions?
  - What forms were most frequently employed?
2. What forms did the students prefer most, and why?

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### *Context*

The present study was conducted in a Research Writing Skills course at a private college in Selangor, Malaysia. The course was one of the compulsory subjects offered to final-year Business Studies students and is a pre-requisite paper before the students begin their Final Year Project (FYP). This course was chosen because it was a writing class and the students were asked to complete a research paper (1000-1500 words), which involved drafting and

revising their paper based on their lecturer's feedback. The duration of the course was one semester, which lasted for 14 weeks. Throughout the course, students were taught research writing skills which involved the skills of summarising, paraphrasing, referencing, editing and, finally, producing a research paper. The students were also taught skills to enhance readability in their research paper by focussing on signalling, signposting and topic strings.

#### *Participants*

#### **Lecturers' Profile**

The lecturers who were teaching this program were Shirin and Phylicia (pseudonyms). Shirin is an experienced ESL professional in her early 30s. She has been teaching at private colleges in Malaysia for five years. She holds a Master's degree in English Language. She completed her Bachelor's degree in English Language and has been in charge of the current research writing skills course in her college for two years. Similarly, Phylicia is also an ESL professional, but in her late 20s. She has been teaching in the same college for the past three years. She is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Language and has been teaching the research writing course for two years.

#### **Students' Profile**

A total of 38 students from two research writing classes participated in this study.

They are Malaysian Chinese and come from middle-income families. The students are a mixed-gender between the ages of 21 and 23 years old. Their first language is one of the many Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese or Mandarin. Thus, English is either their second or third language. The students are in their final year of their studies (fifth semester) and are currently pursuing either a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration or Bachelor's degree in Accounting and Finance.

For the purposes of the interview conducted as part of this study, 15 students were selected from the pool of 38 students (see Table 1). The reason was to probe further into their reflections and thoughts

on the feedback received, and to provide insights on the type of feedback deemed useful. The students were selected based on their responses to the open-ended questions in Section 3 of the questionnaire; students who provided detailed and clear responses were selected (see Appendix 1). Items No. 1 and 2 looked at the advantages and disadvantages of the written feedback, while Item No. 3 asked about suggestion(s) to improve the delivery of feedback.

#### *Data Collection*

The data for this study was obtained from three research sources: (1) written drafts, (2) questionnaires, and (3) interviews with the students. These three sources are important in this study as they provided detailed

TABLE 1  
Students' Profile

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Writing Habits
Carmen	F	22	Enjoys writing stories and telling stories in Mandarin and writes only in English when doing her assignments
Jaclyn	F	23	Writes in English when she has to do assignments
Jacob	M	22	Writes in English when doing his assignments
Jared	M	21	Loves writing to newspaper columns either in English or Chinese
Keenan	M	23	Writes in English when doing his assignments
Keisha	F	22	Enjoys writing short stories in English during her free time
Kelvin	M	22	Writes in English when doing his assignments
Kenny	M	21	Writes in English when he has to do assignments
Lydia	F	22	Writes in English when she has to do assignments
Natalie	F	23	Writes in English when doing her assignments
Shanice	F	21	Enjoys writing in blogs and her diary either in English or Mandarin
Sylvia	F	21	Writes in English when doing her assignments
Victory	F	22	Enjoys writing during her leisure time, penning her thoughts in blogs and her diary
Vincent	M	23	Writes in English when he has to do assignments
Zara	F	21	Writes in English when she has to do assignments

information on the usefulness of each type of feedback.

### **Written Drafts**

The drafts of the research paper were collected from both lecturers once they had finished commenting on the research papers in Week 11 of the semester. Upon collecting the research papers, copies of the paper were made and returned to the respective lecturers. In the drafts, the lecturers provided students with written feedback on how to improve their research paper. Two types of feedback were provided: in-text feedback and overall feedback. The in-text feedback included all comments written by the lecturer in the text; it was mostly written in the margin of the text. The feedback given was considered the spontaneous thoughts of the lecturers, and it acted as a dialogue between the students and their lecturers. The overall feedback was in the form of a letter-like text. In the overall feedback, both lecturers summarised their main concerns and put forth a more general feedback on the written draft. The in-text and overall feedback was collated word for word in order to have a comprehensive list of the lecturers' comments.

### **Questionnaires**

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) was designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data related to the general feedback experience and feedback preferences of the students. The questionnaire which was disseminated to the 38 students consisted of three

main sections: (1) students' demographic background information, (2) students' perceptions on the feedback received from their lecturer, and (3) students' experience and suggestions to improve the delivery of feedback. The questions in the questionnaire had three different types of questions; five close-ended questions, 20 close-ended questions with a four-point Likert scale, and three open-ended questions. Prior to administering the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with five students from another research writing group to test the "clarity, comprehensiveness, and acceptability" of the questions (Rea & Parker, 2005, pp.31-32). During the pilot test, the researcher was present and the participants answered and provided feedback about the quality of the questions. The participants of the pilot test did not encounter any problems with the questions as they mentioned that the questions were clear, direct and easily understood. They took around 15 minutes to complete all the items in the questionnaire.

The researcher briefed the 38 students from both writing classes about the study prior to administering the questionnaires. Ethical consent was sought from the participants. The questionnaire was then administered to the students in Week 12 of the semester, a week after they had received written feedback on their research paper from their lecturers. It was done without the presence of their lecturers in order to ensure that the students were comfortable and felt free to write about their feelings and feedback preferences.

### Students' Interviews

The interviews were to complement the findings of the questionnaires and to generate in-depth and rich descriptions about the students' perspectives on the usefulness and preferences of the different types of written feedback. Fifteen students were interviewed to explore the students' perceptions and attitudes towards the written feedback (see Appendix 2). This study used a semi-structured interview as it expected to allow little or no deviation for key questions to be posed at each interview, with the freedom to change the sequence of questions and to probe for further information (Fielding & Thomas, 2001). The key questions were about student's preferences on the types of feedback and the usefulness of each feedback.

### Data Analysis

The data from the written text was arranged and coded into categories. First, the coding categories for a speech acts framework were identified through the reading of the written text. The main functions of the feedback types were derived from the speech acts/ language functions, and the sub-categories were adapted from earlier studies (see Ferris et. al., 1997; Kumar & Stracke, 2007).

The in-text and overall feedback was read through individually to develop a system of categorisation. In order to develop an appropriate categorisation, it took several rounds of individual categorisation followed by intensive discussions with two other post-graduate students and a senior lecturer until a consensus on an appropriate categorisation model was reached. This was for the purpose of inter-rater reliability. The data was analysed quantitatively based on the effects of the comments on the students, hence it was appropriate to analyse the feedback based on the coding of the two functions of speech: directive and expressive (Holmes, 2001; Searle, 1969).

### RESULTS

#### *Types and Forms of Feedback in Terms of Speech Act Functions*

The findings from the written drafts indicate that two forms of feedback which Shirin and Phylcia commonly used were directive and expressive feedback where a total of 1399 instances of feedback were found in the students' written drafts. In terms of the categories of feedback, directive feedback forms the bulk of the feedback at 82.5% (see Table 3). Providing directive feedback is an act which commits the receiver of the

TABLE 2  
Feedback Categories for Speech Act Functions

Main Function	Subcategory	Examples
Directive	suggestion	• Could you please combine this paragraph with the previous one?
	instruction	• This should be in your introductory paragraph.
	clarification	• Why only Korea? How is this related to your paper?
Expressive	approval	• Good job done! Your ideas are well organised.
	disapproval	• Serious flaws in your work!

message to do something (Holmes, 2001; Jakobson, 1960; Searle, 1969). In directive feedback, there are three sub-categories of feedback: instruction, clarification and suggestion (see Table 4).

Following this, expressive feedback constituted 17.5% of the total feedback on the written texts. Providing expressive feedback is an act in which the sender of the message expresses his/her feelings (Holmes, 2001; Jakobson, 1960; Searle, 1969). Under expressive feedback, there are two sub-categories of feedback, which are: approval and disapproval. Table 3 below indicates the distribution of feedback among the categories but this is not intended to suggest such proportions are generalisable beyond the scope of this study. In the following section, the sub-categories of directive and expressive feedback are discussed in detail.

Five sub-categories of feedback were evident from the data, which are:

directive-instruction, directive-clarification, directive-suggestion, expressive-approval and expressive-disapproval (see Table 4).

The most commonly received feedback was directive-instruction feedback (52.4%) (see Table 4). It was written in the imperative form, for example:

*Elaborate on the current situation in Malaysia and how globalisation affects the current situation and State your stand in the first paragraph.*

The second most common type of feedback received was directive-clarification feedback (27.2%). The comments in this category were mostly written in question form but some were in the form of statements, for instance:

*Is this a sub-heading? and I'm lost -- what is the good aspect here?.*

TABLE 3  
Distribution of Feedback Form Based on Speech Act Functions

Categories	Number of feedback	Percentage (%)
Directive	1154	82.5
Expressive	245	17.5
Total	1399	100

TABLE 4  
Frequency of Sub-Categories of Feedback Forms Received

Types of Feedback	Number of feedback	Percentage (%)
Directive-instruction	733	52.4
Directive-clarification	381	27.2
Directive-suggestion	40	3
Expressive-disapproval	160	11.4
Expressive-approval	85	6
Total	1399	100



Expressive-disapproval feedback was the third commonly provided feedback (11.4%). The comments were written in statement form, for example:

*This quote does not support your earlier statements and but the sub-heading for this section is peers.*

This was followed by expressive-approval feedback (6%). Approval feedback was written in statement form and in a two-word and one-word combination. Approval comments serve as either personal (what the reader likes) or academic (acknowledging what the student has accomplished) reader-response functions, for instance:

*Yes, good point and Well-organised/structured.*

Directive-suggestion feedback was the type of feedback that was least used by both lecturers (3%). The comments were written in statement form and contain some form of hedging and it is less direct compared to instruction feedback. For example:

*I wonder if you could include more academic references to support your claims and Perhaps some quotes would be useful here.*

*Student-writers' Preferences for the Different Forms of Feedback*

First, it was found from the questionnaires that all 38 students responded to the questionnaire and the students rated the usefulness of feedback types according to speech acts on a 4-point agreement scale (1- Not Useful, 2- Least Useful, 3- Useful, and 4- Very Useful). When arranged according to frequency of the number of participants who agreed with the statements (see Table 5), it was found that students valued directive-instruction feedback (97%), expressive-disapproval feedback (92%), directive-clarification feedback (89%), expressive-approval feedback (87%), and directive-suggestion feedback (82%).

Secondly, the data gathered through the interviews were consistent with the results from the questionnaires. All 15 students (six males and nine females) who

TABLE 5  
Usefulness of Written Feedback

Types of Written Feedback	NU	LU	U	VU	Total	
					Not Useful	Useful
	<i>f</i> (P)	<i>f</i> (P)	<i>f</i> (P)	<i>f</i> (P)	<i>f</i> (P)	<i>f</i> (P)
Directive-instruction	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	29 (74%)	8 (24%)	1 (3%)	37 (97%)
Directive-clarification	1 (0%)	3 (8%)	30 (63%)	4 (29%)	4 (11%)	34 (89%)
Directive-suggestion	3 (0%)	4 (3%)	25 (68%)	6 (29%)	7 (18%)	31 (82%)
Expressive-approval	1 (0%)	4 (5%)	28 (71%)	5 (24%)	5 (13%)	33 (87%)
Expressive-disapproval	2 (3%)	1 (8%)	28 (71%)	7 (18%)	3 (8%)	35 (92%)

Note: NU: Not Useful, LU: Least Useful, U: Useful, VU: Very Useful, *f*: Frequency, P: Percentage

were selected to participate in the interview showed appreciation for the feedback they received from their lecturers. They found directive-instruction, directive-clarification, expressive-approval and expressive-disapproval useful in their essay revision. But they did not find directive-suggestion feedback particularly enlightening as it was one of the types of feedback that was least received (3%) (see Table 4) from their lecturers. Each sub-category from directive and expressive feedback is discussed in detail in the following section.

### **Directive: Instruction**

All 15 students found directive-instruction feedback the most useful type of feedback in their revision. They agreed that directive-instruction comments provided them a clear roadmap on what was needed to be amended. It should be noted that feedback offers a sense of direction to the writer (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). One of the students, Natalie, mentioned that directive-instruction feedback gave her the idea that “this is how I should take the direction of the writing.” She liked it because it “points out and tells me what to do.” Similarly, Keisha also agreed that directive-instruction feedback helped in her revision as she mentioned, “Ms. Shirin highlighted the things which are not right and told me how to correct the work.” Keenan too mentioned that “I feel very happy because Ms. Shirin provides me a way on how I can improve my writing when she said like, *‘tell me what floating market means, then explain how it concerns to the matter you described; why is floating*

*market a concern’*. So she is like in a way trying to tell me how to revise what I have written before and see whether the ideas are related to this particular paragraph.” Finally, Carmen also agreed with the other students as she claimed, “The feedback that Ms. Phylicia provided was clear to me as I knew where my strengths and weaknesses of the paper were.”

Furthermore, Jared also found directive-instruction feedback to be well focused and he quoted an example from his draft which was *‘provide a link and signpost clearly’*. He stated that “this feedback provides me with clear ideas which are helpful and I know what I am supposed to do.” Similarly, Jaclyn found that she “knew how to go about it [the revision]” with directive-instruction feedback as Ms. Phylicia wrote, *‘do not start your sentence with ‘because’!*. The students liked directive-instruction feedback because their lecturers were focussed in pointing out exactly where they had gone wrong, and they liked to be told what did not make sense and to have suggestions on how they could revise their faults.

Sylvia, Jacob and Zara mentioned that they were thankful for the feedback provided as they had yet to receive such detailed feedback which helped them in the essay revision. Sylvia mentioned, “I am thankful for the feedback as nobody taught me before this class and I thought that is the way to do the work ... Ms. Shirin highlighted the things which are not right and told me how to correct the work.” Jacob found directive-instruction feedback to be clear and well-focused as his lecturer

told him exactly what and where he had gone wrong in his paper. As a result, he “improved a lot based on the feedback” and mentioned that without the feedback, “I wouldn’t have known that I am actually at this level. So it actually opened my eyes and my brain.” He also claimed that he considered himself to be a non-skilled writer at that time but with “...this feedback, they are very helpful and it helps me improve to be a skilled writer.” Zara also mentioned that instruction feedback provided her with learning experience as she pointed to an example in the feedback she had received, ‘*Convince your reader by quoting studies – provide evidence for your argument*’. From this feedback she learnt that whenever “I write or argue about something, I must have a reference... in order to prove my information to be reliable.” She also gave another example ‘*you need to structure your argument*’, from which she realised that, “I’m very poor in structuring... and I have to go back and study on how to structure my writing.”

This finding confirms with Hattie and Timperley’s (2007) claim that a teacher who provides effective feedback is one who highlights information about how the writer can progress or proceed with the task. At the same time, it corroborates with Hyland (1990) and Mahili’s (1994) call for detailed and informative comments on content. It also further supports Ogede’s (2002) view that directive, specific comments save students from a “gloomy future” (p. 108). He also argues that directive comments are effective because students need their

teachers to share their knowledge about effective writing by telling them in clear, certain terms that “rigorous commentary holds the key to the needed remedial action... the instructor cannot afford to leave the students with an impression that the suggestions offered to improve their writing are optional” (p. 108).

### **Directive: Clarification**

The 15 students also found directive-clarification feedback to be useful in their revision. All of them agreed that clarification feedback provided directions as to how to revise their paper. Lydia was sure about what she was supposed to do with directive-clarification feedback such as ‘*Huh, what are you trying to say? I’m lost*’ because she knew what she was supposed to amend in her paper such as “making the ideas clearer so the reader becomes clear about what I say.” Keenan was also sure about what he was supposed to do because he found the feedback to be specific and clear; he mentioned, “Ms. Shirin asked me, ‘*Impose what?*’ and I know I need to elaborate more on the imposing of trade barrier.” Along the same lines, Kelvin claimed that Ms. Phylisia “told him what and how exactly to re-do it” and “she told me what I should put in ethical advertisement here.” Natalie understood what Ms. Shirin was trying to tell her as “this shows what is it that she doesn’t understand” by pointing to ‘*Effective or effectively? Which one are you using, the adjective or adverb form?*’ They mentioned that they understood what their lecturer wanted them to amend because the

comments were specific and their lecturer had provided explanations after she had written her questions. This supports Straub's (1997) study which found that students preferred comments which are "specific, offer direction for revision, and come across as help" (p.112).

It also confirms Lindemann's (2001) claim that effective feedback should be focussed, clear, applicable and encouraging. Lunsford (1997) also encouraged teachers to "say enough for students to know what you mean" (p.103) and as mentioned by Hyland & Hyland (2006) in order for improvement to take place, feedback should be loaded with information. It can be concluded with Ryan's (1997) view that lecturer's feedback helped the students to understand how well they were writing and how they might further develop their writing.

### **Expressive: Approval**

In expressive-approval feedback, all 15 students received approval feedback from their lecturer. All the students, except for Natalie, Kenny and Vincent mentioned that receiving approval feedback was very useful. Most of the students found approval feedback brought them positive effects because they felt highly motivated as their writing goals had been met and it gave them a sense of achievement. Upon seeing the feedback '*well-written and well-explained*' on her paper, Lydia mentioned that, "I'm happy to receive this type of feedback as I will know my strength which is I'm able to explain well about the points which I state." Shanice also mentioned that

upon receiving her paper, the comment that caught her eye was '*Good*', as this comment gave her "a dose of motivation" and she was thankful for it. It also encouraged her, and she stated simply, "it really spurs me on." She appreciated the approval feedback because it motivated and encouraged her in her essay revision. She mentioned that, "I didn't know that I could write and surely, I will remember the good things which I've done in this paper and apply them for my future writing." Similarly, Victory mentioned that she was motivated by the approval feedback as it made her realise what worked in her paper and what did not. She liked the feedback '*well organized and well structured*' which Ms. Shirin wrote beside her table of contents and she assumed "that whenever I do table of contents, I have a better understanding of how to do it." She also mentioned that, "Ok, this is like a plus point ... and I'm quite glad that she actually pointed out not only the weaknesses on this paper but also the strength." Kelvin mentioned that he was initially surprised because he was not very confident about his essay but later felt very happy and pleased when he received approval feedback. His lecturer had written, '*Well-defined as you explained very well what is the current economic situation in Malaysia*', and this boosted his confidence as a writer.

When the students were able to produce successful drafts, it boosted their confidence and increased their enjoyment of writing. This clearly shows that the feedback provided "information about the gap between the actual level and the reference

level of a system parameter which is used to alter gap in some way” (Ramaprasad, 1983, p.4). Similarly, Gee (2006) discovered that students who received praise increased in confidence, pride, and enjoyment in their work. Praise feedback will inspire and motivate students to write better; teachers have the potential to motivate students to revise their drafts (Leki, 1991) and improve their writing skills (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995).

On the other hand, Natalie, Kenny and Vincent did not find approval feedback useful because it did not motivate and benefit them. Natalie relates her experience as “there are so much of negative feedback in my writing, the positive doesn't give the impact it should.” Natalie found that approval feedback did not motivate and benefit her and she “expects good quality feedback rather than telling ‘OK, *this is good*’ and ‘*this is fine*’”. She expected her lecturer to provide her with “constructive feedback by giving ways to improve my work rather than saying its good.” She also added that “tell me specifically what is good and what is working, not just stating good” as this was not helpful to her.

Likewise, Kenny felt that receiving positive comments did not help him as a writer as he stated, “I don't learn much from very positive comments.” He mentioned that he preferred “Negative comments because it points out what mistake you made and what point is weak in your paper so we can improve the paper.” Similarly, Vincent also claimed that approval feedback did not work for him as he felt “so small after doing and

putting a lot of effort” and after reading the feedback he felt “so helpless” when he saw so much negative feedback on his paper. Vincent was not sure as to why his lecturer praised him. He was not sure why Ms. Phylcia had written ‘*great*’ beside his opening sentence. He was frustrated with his lecturer because he wanted his lecturer to praise “on the points that I deemed important” but instead “she wrote ‘*great*’ on the word ‘*firstly*’ as even secondary school students can write this ‘*firstly*’, right? I don't know why.”

This finding is in agreement with Weaver's (2006) findings which showed that students yearned for specifically written positive feedback instead of infrequent, brief and vague praise comments. Praise feedback, therefore, should be specifically written and should not be general or vague as happens when one-word comments are given (e.g. ‘good’ and ‘great’). Another study which agrees with the idea that praise feedback needs to be worded specifically is Straub's (1997) study which concluded that students appreciated comments that praised their writing, especially those that offered specific praise.

### **Expressive: Disapproval**

The students had mixed reactions at receiving expressive-disapproval feedback. Most of the students openly embraced disapproval feedback except for Jared who discussed the advantages and disadvantages of disapproval feedback. Jaclyn claimed that disapproval feedback “... doesn't affect me as a writer because I'm more

concerned about what Ms. Shirin thought about my paper” because she believed her lecturer had her best interest as a writer in mind; hence, she viewed the comments as constructive to her essay revision. This finding corroborates Button’s (2002) study which argued that students appreciate and benefit from constructive criticism. Zara also found disapproval feedback to be beneficial to her as she explained, “Ms. Phylcia’s feedback is constructive, so to me this is not damaging.” She mentioned that “this is not something to be sensitive about because for me I take criticism positively. If it is good for me then I should be able to accept it.” Jacob declared that he did not take disapproval feedback personally and it did not upset him. Comments like *you have too many points here* did not bother him because, he explained, “I agreed with what she said because I actually crammed too many points in one paragraph. As we all know by now, we all have to divide and organize our essay into a cohesive argument.” He mentioned that “it shows that I have a lot to learn about writing.” This showed that the students welcomed and appreciated disapproval feedback because it was constructive and it helped them improve their writing; additionally, it also increased their self-confidence in their writing (Goldstein, 2004).

On the other hand, Jared mentioned that disapproval feedback could simultaneously upset and benefit him. In the beginning, he found disapproval to be intimidating and capable of hurting his self-confidence as a writer, but later, he talked about how

it inspired him to improve his essay. For example, he mentioned that “it was very negative and it was uh, very hard for me to take all these negative comments too much at one time. So I felt very bad and it took me time to recuperate.” But towards the end of the interview, he mentioned that “after seeing it a few times, I felt I should improve, I mean yes, and I should improve because it actually is for my own good.”

The students in this study liked disapproval feedback and as they revised their essays, they had the notion that revision is a process of discovery (Hayes, 1996). One of the students, Victor, mentioned that he did not take the disapproval feedback his lecturer provided personally but instead felt it was a discovery process for him. He found that disapproval feedback taught him how to “divide and organize his ideas well to form a cohesive argument.” This also clearly showed that the element of self-regulated learning (SRL) was present as the feedback provided opportunities for them to realise the mistakes they had made and how to rectify them. The feedback made them move from their zone of current development (ZCD) to a zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978).

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The students in this study were ESL learners in tertiary level and they found the written feedback on their work helpful and useful in their essay revision. This indicates that the directive and expressive feedback was valued highly by the students in this study. The reason for this was that the comments

were clear, direct and information-loaded. In other words, the feedback offered a sense of direction to the students (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The feedback was also effective to the students because the students were able to attend to the revision of their draft. The feedback was appropriate to the essays, held good information and was relevant to the students' writing level. This further supports Hattie and Timperley's (2007) claim that effective feedback provided with the correct load of information can impact a writer in the revision process. The feedback provided was not only clear and effective, but it also alerted the students about their current writing skills and how the feedback can further develop their writing (Ryan, 1997). The students were able to advance with their essay revision because they were provided constructive feedback which inspired them to revise their essays and at the same time, build self-confidence in writing (Goldstein, 2004).

The element of motivation was also present in this study. Motivation is an important feature of feedback in the concept of active learning (Butler, 1988). The lecturers' feedback inspired and motivated the students to write better because lecturers often have the potential to motivate students to revise their drafts (Leki, 1991) and improve their writing skills (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995). This indicates that feedback and motivation work hand in hand. In this study, lecturers' feedback played an important role in motivating and encouraging the students to revise. The students in this study were provided with

constructive feedback and it inspired them to write revised drafts better, hence, increasing self-confidence in their writing (Goldstein, 2004).

The feedback also provided developmental experience to the students. The written feedback helped them move from being inexperienced writers to experienced writers. This clearly shows that feedback provided them the opportunity to move from their zone of current development (ZCD) to the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). The written feedback gave them new ideas and made them understand what the lecturer wanted in an essay that reflected their ideas clearly (Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Sternglass, 1997). The feedback also made it clear to the students that the writing goals were met, supporting Sadler's (1989) explanation that feedback is "information given to the student about the quality of performance" (p.142). Therefore, it can be argued that without well-directed feedback, the students in this study may not have been able to comprehend the feedback and, therefore, achieve their writing goal, which is to produce an improved version of their essay.

It can be concluded that written feedback did play a major and constructive role in the students' revision of their essays; perhaps the feedback was one major source of explicit input to the students regarding their essays (James & Garrett, 1990). The reason for the students' desire for such feedback could be that being young and unskilled writers, they had not been trained to thinking critically on their own. Thus, this study also reveals that

communication skills are important because feedback is considered a form of speech and that feedback itself is a communicative act between the lecturer and students. This highlights that written feedback does play an important role in students' writing and students do value them.

### **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Four pedagogical implications emerged from this study. The students greatly valued their lecturer's written feedback, and the following implications are based on what they found both useful and lacking in the written feedback. The four implications are to write enough information in their feedback, to provide instruction feedback, to provide specific praise feedback and to have student-teacher conferences. In addition to the above implications, a need for training in the area of providing effective feedback is also apparent, suggesting a possibility of developing a taxonomy of good feedback practices for lecturers.

Firstly, lecturers should write enough information in their comments. When lecturers give feedback, they should "say enough for students to understand what you mean" (Lunsford, 1997, p.103). This clearly shows that in order for the feedback to be effective, the lecturers must provide feedback which is *information-loaded* in order for the students to respond and act on it (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Secondly, lecturers could provide instruction feedback when providing feedback to students. It is found in this study

that the writers liked directive-instruction feedback as they benefitted much from it and it gave them a sense of direction (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Students would like to know exactly what works and what does not work in their paper (Ogede, 2002).

Thirdly, lecturers could provide approval feedback that is specific. As discovered in this study, some of the students did not know the reason for praise from their lecturer. Therefore, lecturers should provide specific praise to encourage students to the end that they know what they did well in the paper and use that understanding in future writing; such understanding also boosts their confidence in writing (Straub, 1997).

The fourth implication is that the students wanted writing conference sessions with their lecturer as these would provide them with the opportunity to clarify ideas and ask questions regarding their work. Therefore, lecturers could try to incorporate writing conference sessions into their course. These writing conferences could take place during the stages of brainstorming, composing or revising as helpful guides in the writing process.

In order for lecturers/teachers to provide students with effective feedback, there is a need for training for lecturers/teachers in the area of providing effective feedback. Schools and universities could provide teachers/lecturers with workshops and talks on how to provide students with effective feedback. This study shows that written feedback assisted the students in their essay revision and they wanted written feedback that is specific and information-loaded.



At the same time, this study also provided a possibility of developing a taxonomy of good feedback practices for lecturers (see Table 2). Lecturers may compare the taxonomy to their own relevant experiences and opinions. Lecturers may consider this model and the opinions of the writers presented in this research study while giving feedback to their own students. Finally, this study might lead to similar research studies that may collectively provide a more extensive taxonomy for understanding students' attitudes and perceptions related to their lecturer's feedback.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

The findings of this study point to several promising directions for future research. Thus, recommendations are that future studies could be conducted to further explore the issues addressed in this study. One possibility would be to include students' revised essays in order to compare the changes done in the draft according to the lecturer's feedback. If the revised essays were included, a comparison of the original essay and the revised essay could have been done. This would confirm whether or not the writers did incorporate and utilise the written feedback in their revised essays. However, this option was not within the scope of this study, so it remains a facet of feedback for future research in order to gauge whether students do utilise teacher feedback in their essay revision and to what extent, and if they do not, then to understand

what reasons caused them not to utilise teacher feedback in their revision.

The second stage of the study could be repeated with a larger and more diverse group of students and lecturers to increase the generalisability of the results and to find out whether it is typical of other lecturers to provide their students with types of feedback similar to the ones used in this study. Additionally, a comparison study could also be done among different groups of students considered 'skilled' and 'unskilled' writers to find out if both groups of students appreciate the same type of feedback or what type of feedback the different groups find useful.

This study could be replicated with the addition of student-lecturer conferences in order to find how effective student-lecturer conferences are when given alongside written feedback. Teacher conferences are useful for students to clarify any confusion and misunderstanding of written feedback (Brender, 1995; Samuels, 2002; Zamel, 1985). It serves as a backup system in case students get stuck and need to discuss an issue which they are not clear about.

This study would also benefit from future research by incorporating peer feedback. Peer feedback tends to be less authoritative than teacher feedback (Berkenkotter, 1984; Cho, Schunn, & Charney, 2006). Thus, a comparison study of teacher feedback and peer feedback could yield answers as to which feedback, teacher feedback or peer feedback, students prefer and find to be more useful in the revision of essays.

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**APPENDIX 1**

**Questionnaire on Written Feedback**

Dear students,

This questionnaire consists of three parts: (1) demographic background information, (2) questions about your perceptions on the feedback received from your lecturer, and (3) questions about your experience relating to the feedback. This questionnaire will only be used for this specific research.

**Section I:**

**Demographic Background Information**

1. Gender:  Male  Female
2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Year of study : \_\_\_\_\_ Current semester of study: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Have you ever received any feedback on your writing prior to this course?  
 Yes  No (Please proceed to Section II of this questionnaire)
5. When was the last time you received feedback on your writing?  
 (Please state month and year)  
 Month: \_\_\_\_\_ Year: \_\_\_\_\_

**Section II:**

**Each statement below describes one type of feedback you may receive from your lecturer with examples provided. Circle the number indicating how useful each type of feedback is (1 = not useful, 2 = least useful, 3 = useful, and 4 = very useful).**

	Types of Feedback	Feedback Rating			
		1	2	3	4
	Feedback which instructs you to make changes that are necessary to the text. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preview your main point here.</li> <li>• Write in paragraphs and provide clear links.</li> </ul>	1	2	3	4
	Feedback which seeks further information about the ideas mentioned in the paper. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does this support your stand?</li> <li>• What is your justification for this claim?</li> </ul>	1	2	3	4

Feedback which suggests incorporating additional details to improve the quality of the paper. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't you mean "cell phones"?</li> <li>• This is a better point for introduction.</li> </ul>	1	2	3	4
Feedback which expresses the lecturer's dissatisfaction with the essay or part of the essay. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You have too many points here.</li> <li>• Weak introduction.</li> </ul>	1	2	3	4
Feedback which expresses the lecturer's satisfaction with the essay or part of the essay. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excellent introduction.</li> <li>• Good point.</li> </ul>	1	2	3	4
Feedback which refers to grammar/editing mistakes. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Page number?</li> <li>• Language! Use "-ed" for past tense.</li> </ul>	1	2	3	4
Feedback which refers to the content matters in a paragraph. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You have not introduced this term (<b>Big-Five</b>) yet.</li> <li>• What is the point of this paragraph?</li> </ul>	1	2	3	4
Feedback which refers to the overall organisation of the paper. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use transition signals to improve readability.</li> <li>• Provide a link between sections and sub-sections.</li> </ul>	1	2	3	4

### Section III:

**Please take a few minutes to think about your experience in receiving teacher feedback. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the numbers below (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree).**

The feedback ...	Degree of agreement			
• was easy to understand.	1	2	3	4
• was clearly written.	1	2	3	4
• allowed me to understand the weaknesses of my draft.	1	2	3	4
• motivated me to revise my draft.	1	2	3	4
• made me aware of my grammatical mistakes.	1	2	3	4
• improved the content of my writing.	1	2	3	4
• allowed better organization of my writing.	1	2	3	4
• made me aware of editorial mistakes.	1	2	3	4
• improved my writing ability.	1	2	3	4

Written Feedback on ESL Student Writers' Academic Essays

• broadened my understanding about different types of writing.	1	2	3	4
• helped me understand the criteria of good writing.	1	2	3	4
• had educated me on how to review my writing.	1	2	3	4

1. What were the advantages of the feedback?

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2. What were the disadvantages of the feedback?

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3. How can the giving of feedback be improved?

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**Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.**

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **Interview with Students**

#### **In-depth interview questions**

##### **A. Pre-interview questions**

1. Do you generally expect feedback from your lecturer regarding your assignment?
  - If yes, what kind of feedback?
  - If no, why not?
2. How did you feel about your lecturer's comments on this paper?
3. Do you usually read all the written comments or only some of them?
  - If some, why?

##### **B. Main interview questions**

Prior to asking the participants questions related to their drafts, the participants were given 5-10 minutes to look at their paper. 3-5 feedback from the students' essays was randomly referred to in order to obtain specific responses and comments on the feedback received.

1. What kind of comment(s) did you particularly like?
  - Why?
2. Which kind of comment(s) did you not like?
  - Why?
3. What kind of comments did you find to be most helpful?
  - Why?
4. What kind of comments did you find to be least helpful?
  - Why? Could you please explain?
5. Which comment(s) did you find easy to attend to?
6. Which comment(s) did you find most difficult to attend to?  
(If participant is confused, need to be careful about asking the following question)
7. Are there any comments that you did not understand based on the feedback given?
  - If yes, which ones?



8. What sort of confusion did you experience?
9. Does rereading the comments help you overcome this confusion?
  - If no, why?
10. Do you think the comments on your paper were sufficient?
  - If no, what else did you expect?
11. Are there any parts of the paper/ aspects of the paper that you expected to receive comment(s) on but did not?
  - What kind of comments were you expecting?
  - Why did you expect that type of comment?
12. Will you discuss any of your comments with your lecturer?
13. Which ones?

**C. Closing**

1. Would you prefer if your lecturer wrote a lot of comments, a moderate number, few or none?
  - Explain the reason for your preference.
2. Consider the following aspects:

**Content**

**Structure**

**Language**

- In which aspect do you want your lecturer's feedback the most? Why?
  - In which aspect do you want least feedback? Why?
3. If you were to grade the helpfulness of the feedback on a scale of 1-5, how would you grade it?

1	2	3	4	5
Not helpful	Least helpful	Helpful	Moderately helpful	Extremely helpful

Why?

4. How did you feel after rewriting based on the comments from your lecturer?

