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Feedback in Practice: The Effects of Written Feedback and Conferences on Student Writing Scores in Ninth Grade English Classrooms

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FEEDBACK IN PRACTICE: THE EFFECTS OF WRITTEN FEEDBACK AND

CONFERENCES ON STUDENT WRITING SCORES IN NINTH GRADE ENGLISH

CLASSROOMS

by

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A capstone thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The ability of an individual to articulate their thoughts in written form has historically been, and continues to be, an incredibly important skill for productive function in society. (Graham et al. 2019, Graham et al. 2011) Teachers of writing help students develop these skills and grow as writers. One key way, particularly at the secondary level, that teachers help students grow as writers is by providing feedback on their writing. However, feedback is often inconsistent in practice. Sometimes feedback focuses only on grammar, usage, mechanics and other sentence/word-level errors. Other times, teacher feedback is more focussed on probing for further explanation or deeper questioning. By developing better, more consistent strategies for feedback, teachers of writing will improve the potential for growth among their students in this essential life skill.

As a teacher of writing who feels that I am inconsistent in my feedback on student writing, I have landed on a research question—the investigation of which will help me improve my practice. This question is: *How can I improve feedback on student writing in order to help students improve their writing skills?*

This chapter will first give an overview of my history as a writer and as a teacher of writing, which will explain in more detail my journey towards becoming interested in this research question. The second section will discuss the significance of the question to educational stakeholders.

History as a Writer and a Teacher of Writing

Though I don't have a particularly strong recollection of my time as an elementary student, I do remember always enjoying writing. I especially enjoyed when I was asked to be creative with writing and was given the opportunity to craft and tell stories. In third grade, the lessons on how to structure a paragraph came easily to me and I found that I was able to transition my writing from creative stories to explanatory reports without much of a challenge. I was a terrible illustrator. To this day I am horrible at drawing. However, I felt that working through a piece of writing gave me a similar sense of satisfaction. I could be creative with the language that I was using and the words helped me paint a mental picture of sorts for my readers.

At the secondary level, I began to become all-too-well acquainted with the much hated five paragraph essay. At times, I felt constrained by this format and felt as if adhering to it limited my ability to express and explain myself in the way that I wanted to. The "transitional phrases" that I was required to use between paragraphs felt inauthentic and pre-packaged. The paragraph structure that I adjusted to and utilized to my benefit in third grade suddenly felt as if my ideas were being shoved into a small cupboard with no room to breathe, develop and expand.

As I continued my education in high school and college, I slowly learned how to expand on the five-paragraph essay. In ninth grade, I was introduced to rhetorical analysis and in Advanced Placement (AP) Language and AP Literature, I was expected to develop my ideas and observations further than ever before. The essays for these classes were the first time that I was forced to write more extensively and break out of the

confines of the format that I knew so well and, despite the previously stated frustrations with it, felt safe. This was when I began to understand the merits of this format. It's important to pique the interest of the reader while introducing a topic. It's also important to preview the information that is to come so that the reader isn't taken by surprise and can therefore focus on what is being written about. It's important to review what was written about and provide a conclusion that keeps your reader thinking about what you've written after they are finished reading. Good writing connects ideas in order to transition the reader through the main points of your writing. The five-paragraph essay wasn't a prison, it was a seed. It was a starting point. It provided a foundation that could be built on and it also instilled specific skills that would need to be habits later.

Though my writing ability developed and improved throughout my years as a student, I did notice that the process for writing in different classrooms differed greatly. Sometimes—usually on standardized tests, but sometimes on other assessments as well—I was asked to write in one sitting. Other times, we had longer work periods and were tasked with writing and submitting multiple drafts that were given feedback. I can definitively say that the quality of my writing improved when we were required to submit multiple drafts. I believe that this was due to a combination of edits that I made on my own as well as edits that I made based on teacher feedback. This makes total sense in retrospect. Generally speaking, the more time spent on a piece of writing, the more polished it will become.

I noticed throughout my time as a student that different teachers had different methods for providing feedback for students. Some teachers would provide written

feedback (some even had symbols that meant specific things with keys for us to look at in syllabi so that we could understand). Sometimes the teacher would provide margin notes about specific things that could improve in the writing and sometimes the teacher would write a quick note at the end next to a score. Some teachers provided rubrics for written assignments, while others simply gave letter grades. Another way that feedback was given was verbally via one-on-one conferences. Teachers would sit down with each student and look over their writing with them. A conversation would happen between the teacher and the student and the student would then return to independent writing. Some teachers utilized both written feedback and one-on-one conferences. What I noticed was that there didn't seem to be any consistency from teacher to teacher with the way feedback was given and, very often, teachers had inconsistencies in their feedback methods as well. As a student, I didn't know what to expect from each new teacher. I feel lucky that my writing didn't seem to suffer from this but I worry that the lack of consistency in feedback over the years may have adversely affected some of my peers.

Despite this worry, I find that I also lack consistency in my feedback on student writing. At the time of writing this, I am entering my second year of teaching at a large suburban high school in the midwest. My school is fortunate to have a strong technological infrastructure. Students are able to submit their work online using Canvas, which has built-in written feedback capabilities. I utilize these capabilities when providing feedback to students. I am able to highlight specific portions of the text and type feedback into text boxes connected to the highlighted sections. I also spend time meeting with and answering questions from students regarding their writing. My

department utilizes something similar to the Workshop Model (Calkins, 1986). Students submit drafts of their summative writing assignments and are given feedback before submitting a final draft. Students also often participate in peer-editing sessions. I encourage students to be forgiving towards themselves throughout this process. They are encouraged to not worry about their ongoing drafts being perfect. The goal of this is to create an environment where students are comfortable with participating in the writing process and are not afraid of making mistakes. Because of this process, students undoubtedly improve their writing while they are in my classroom. However, I have often found myself thinking that perhaps if I had a specific system for feedback (whether written or face-to-face) that I knew worked well and that I used consistently, that it would benefit my students.

Significance of the Research Question to Educational Stakeholders

I am a strong believer that consistency is key when it comes to education. I believe that when classroom structures and routines are organized and consistent, an environment is created where students can learn effectively. This need for organization, consistency and structure is frequently brought up in conversations discussing learning time and classroom management. It therefore makes sense that having routines and consistency across the board with feedback on student writing would be beneficial to student learning as well. Exploring and answering this research question will be the first step towards creating this consistency within my feedback. I will gain a deeper understanding of what different feedback methods are as well as study which feedback methods work best for students. This knowledge and understanding of feedback will

enable me to provide that consistency for students and will therefore help students improve on writing, which is a critical language skill.

Language is a powerful tool. Helping students improve their writing through consistent, clear feedback, will enable them to better communicate in their lives outside of and after school. It is essential for students to be able to write in order to participate in much of the current economy (Bradford, 2019; Engineering Management Institute, 2019; Conrad, Nd.). That being said, the importance of writing ability goes beyond just employment opportunities. I believe that the main purpose of education is to prepare students to be able to interact positively with the world around them, whether that be in the physical, social or political sphere. Writing ability is a key skill for many of these interactions and therefore anything that teachers can do to help their students develop these skills is of the utmost importance. In addition to this communication, I believe that writing helps people develop and understand their own ideas better. In order to be able to communicate about something, you must truly understand it. Successful navigation of the writing process therefore requires that one learn about the topic that they are writing about. In this way, writing can be utilized as a powerful learning tool across disciplines.

Chapter Summary

In this introductory chapter, I have introduced a research question: How can I improve feedback on students' formal essay writing in order to help students improve their writing skills? I have explained my background as a writer and as an educator and how that background led me to my interest in exploring this question. I then explored the significance of this question to educational stakeholders.

In the next chapter, I will present a literature review where I do a deep dive into theoretical frameworks and research that has been completed about feedback on student writing. Chapter Three will describe the methods for my study of feedback on student writing. Chapter Four will examine and analyze the results of the study. Chapter Five will give concluding thoughts and suggestions for further research on this important topic.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to examine both foundational and current research

surrounding feedback practices in writing classrooms. This research will help address the

question: *How can I improve feedback on student writing in order to help students*

improve their writing skills?

First, there will be an examination of Common Core State Standards as well as

the most recent writing assessment data from the National Assessment of Educational

Progress. The examination of the standards grounds the work that will be done in this

study, as one of the main measures that will be examined is student writing achievement

based on these standards. The national data from the most recent NAEP writing

assessment is examined in order to gauge where students are with regards to writing

proficiency. It's important for teachers to know where students are with regards to skills

before beginning to make curriculum and pedagogical decisions. The scores from the

most recent NAEP writing assessment reflect stark gaps in student writing proficiency

and therefore demonstrate a need for teachers to examine and adjust practice in order to

help students develop their writing skills.

The next section first discusses two widely utilized and cited approaches to

writing instruction. These two approaches are Calkins' Workshop Model and Cohen's

Process Approach (Calkins, 1986; Cohen 1990). The role of the teacher in writing

instruction is extremely important and is discussed in detail, with the general consensus

being that the teacher should act as a guide or coach for students as they navigate their individual writing journeys. The final portion of this section discusses the need for specific teaching of feedback processes as well as the importance of helping students build self-efficacy with regards to their writing skills.

The next section is a deep-dive into written feedback, first defining written feedback and then discussing two types of written feedback: surface-level feedback and content-level feedback. Though most of the data shows that content-level feedback has more of a positive impact on student writing skill development, there is some evidence that surface-level feedback may be effective in certain situations.

Conferences are discussed in the following section. First, the term "conferences" is defined. Following this definition, there is a section on the student-teacher relationship and how conferences require strong relationships but can also support their development. The section concludes with a section which highlights the data that overwhelmingly shows the effectiveness of conferences on helping students improve their writing.

The next section looks into some additional best practices for feedback on student writing that are discussed in research on the topic. These strategies/tools of specificity, text-specific feedback and question asking can be implemented in both written- and conference-style feedback practices and have been shown to help students improve their writing at times in various studies.

This chapter ends with a section of personal reflection on the research as well as a rationale for why this work needs to be done.

Standards and Assessment Data

In order to fully and adequately address the question of how to improve feedback on student writing, it's essential to first understand some background information on student writing and student abilities. Two areas worth examining in order to help develop such an understanding are educational standards for writing as well as data from standardized assessments of student writing ability. The standards are important to discuss because they provide a foundation for what is assessed and therefore taught in classrooms. Assessment data provides macro-level insight into student capabilities and helps teachers understand where students are with regards to skills as well as what areas of teaching should be examined in order to help students improve.

State Writing Standards

The Common Core State Standards were created in response to the wide variance in individual state standards and testing procedures and the unintended incentive for states to create low standards for students so that their scores reflected student achievement (Bidwell, 2014). To address these issues, the Common Core State Standards suggest shared standards for students across the country (Bidwell, 2014). The Common Core State Standards provide a framework from which teachers can make pedagogical and curricular decisions in order to help students develop necessary skills. The Common Core has been criticized due to a variety of factors including ambiguity, the large number of standards, and lack of professional development available for teachers to prepare for

the transition to the standards (Strauss, 2016). However, 41 states have fully adopted the

Common Core State Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2020).

Though the state of Minnesota has not adopted the Common Core State Standards

for all subjects, it has adopted the Common Core State Standards for English Language

Arts, which includes writing (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development,

2020). The Common Core grade 9-10 standards for writing say that students should be

developing skills in writing for multiple purposes and learning to utilize the process of

revision. (English Language Arts Standards). A review of the grade 9-10 Minnesota State

Standards for Writing shows that the state's writing standards are very closely aligned

with the Common Core State Standards for the same grades (Minnesota Department of

Education, 2010).

Misuses of standardized testing data aside, it is essential for educators to know

and understand which skills students are being taught and which standards students are

being assessed on. An understanding of the data allows educators to create curriculum

based on best practices to address the needs of students.

Assessment Data

It is widely recognized by those in the field of education that standardized test

scores are often misunderstood and therefore misused (Gardner, 1989). However, these

scores do provide some indication of where students are with regards to their abilities.

The data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) — a test that is

given nationally to a representative sample of students in order to track educational

progress of American students — from 2011 suggests that large numbers of students in the United States are not meeting proficiency standards in writing skills (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Though standardized test scores do not provide a full picture of student achievement, the sheer number of students that are not meeting proficiency standards as measured by the NAEP is concerning and suggests that teaching practices, along with other larger systematic changes, should be adjusted in order to help students develop stronger writing skills.

Writing Instruction and Feedback

A lot of research has gone into examining and understanding best practices for teaching writing. Secondary-level English students are capable of producing beautiful, thoughtful, and insightful pieces of writing. However, in order for students to maximize their potential with writing, it's essential for teachers of writing to understand how to best guide students through the process of writing.

Workshop Model and Process Approach

Calkins (1986) presents an effective use of a workshop model for teaching reading and writing. In this model, students are guided by the teacher through their writing process in an environment that encouraged multiple drafts and lowered the stakes for errors. Calkins (1986) is widely cited in literature/research about writing instruction and this workshop model has thus had a large influence on the teaching of writing. Versions of this workshop model are seen in many classrooms, where students submit drafts of their writing as they work towards a final copy.

Cohen (1990) presents a similar approach to Calkins: the process approach. Similar to Calkins' workshop model, in the process approach to writing instruction, students develop written work in a series of drafts rather than in a single draft (Cohen, 1990, p. 105). The Minnesota State Writing Standards for grades 9-10 directly align with Cohen's Process approach. Standard 9.7.5.5 states that students must "Use a writing process to develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, drafting, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010, p. 64).

Both the workshop model and process approach to writing instruction are excellent examples of student-centered instruction. In order to be able to implement these approaches, it's important to understand the ideal role of the teacher in a student-centered writing classroom.

The Role of The Teacher

Much of the literature in the past few decades has focused on a student-centered approach to writing instruction (Black, 1998). In student-centered instruction, the role of the teacher differs from teacher-centered approaches. The ideal role of the teacher in a student-centered approach to instruction isn't an unquestionable disseminator of information; rather, the teacher is a guide for students who utilizes their expertise to help students develop and grow as individuals. Both Cohen's and Calkins' methods are examples of such student-centered approaches which position the teacher as such a guide. This method subverts the traditional, hierarchical master-apprentice dynamic that Black

(1998) refers to. In these methods, teachers help students work through drafts in the form of personalized feedback that helps the student edit and redraft their work (Cohen, 1990; Calkins, 1986). Sheridan (2000) also suggests such a model, positioning the teacher as a coach during the writing process who meets individually with students based on need and guides them as they work through their individual writing processes. This positioning of the teacher as a coach is also presented in earlier work on writing instructional practice (Harris, 1986).

Teaching Feedback Processes and Building Student Self-Efficacy

The strongest pedagogical tool that a teacher must develop in order to effectively guide students through their drafts during the writing process is feedback. However, good feedback alone is not enough to improve student writing. Many researchers highlight the importance of teaching feedback practices and teaching strategies for understanding teacher feedback (Cohen, 1990; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981; Poulos & Mahoney, 2008; Zumbrunn et. al, 2016). Students need to understand the feedback that they've received in order to adequately use it to improve future drafts of their writing. Therefore, teachers cannot just assume that students will know what they need to do when they receive feedback. They must both teach skills for decoding and understanding teacher feedback and teach strategies for implementing that feedback.

In designing and implementing feedback methods in their classrooms, teachers should not only focus on the student writing itself. There is research that suggests that other types of related feedback have positive effects on student writing growth as well. Bayraktar (2012) states that teachers should utilize feedback practices in order to help

students develop self-efficacy with regards to writing ability. Bayraktar specifically advocates for student-teacher conferences as a tool for accomplishing this goal. Kepner (1991) addresses a similar idea, advocating for encouragement within written feedback on L2 (English as a second language) post-secondary students' writing. Hale (2018) is more specific, pointing out the importance of identifying and pointing out specific strengths and/or skills that students have with regards to writing in order to build student confidence and self-efficacy before moving into critical comments. Schunk & Swartz (1993) provide a way to accomplish this when they highlight the importance of goal-setting with students during the writing process and giving feedback on the progress students are making towards these goals. Zumbrunn et al. (2016) suggest charting student growth throughout the writing process in order to build/grow students' self-efficacy with regards to writing. Goal-setting and charting growth as part of the feedback process therefore appear to be beneficial ways to highlight strengths as well as student growth, though research findings are not unanimous. Koenig et al. (2016), for example, found that this type of charting progress towards goals did not lead to writing fluency gains more than feedback on student performance alone. Considering the amount of research available on the benefits of charting progress and goal-setting, it's clear that these strategies are likely to help many students if implemented by teachers. Whether a teacher is just providing feedback for students or if the teacher and student are setting goals for future drafts, this type of work requires strong, trusting, student-teacher relationships, which are important in all student-centered approaches to teaching.

Written Feedback

Written feedback is one of the main ways that teachers provide feedback on student writing. This feedback can be provided in multiple formats. Many educators provide written feedback on paper copies of student writing. However, especially in light of COVID-19, digital submissions of and comments on student writing are continuing to become the norm in many schools. Though the digital platform differs from institution to institution, there is no reason to believe that digital submission of student writing and feedback will cease to develop as the norm.

It's important to note precisely what is being referred to as "written feedback." "Written feedback" must be understood in this context as separate from grading. Many teachers will provide written comments on a final copy of a paper as part of the grading process. This summative written feedback is not what is being referred to for the purposes of this literature review and study. Rather, the written feedback being referred to is formative written feedback on drafts of student writing within the Process Approach/Workshop Model that the students then take into account and utilize as they revise and rewrite their subsequent drafts. Not all written feedback is the same and different types of written feedback have different levels of effectiveness. There are two main categories of written feedback: surface-level and content-level.

Defining Surface-Level and Content-Level Written Feedback

In order to understand surface-level and content-level feedback, it's important to first define the terms. What "surface-level" feedback is referring to is feedback that

discusses and/or suggests revisions to things like grammar, sentence structure, formatting, spelling or other surface-level errors. This is different from "content-level" feedback, which is feedback that addresses the specific topics/ideas that the student is writing about. Both surface- and content-level feedback suggest ways for students to improve their writing. However, content-level feedback focuses on the big picture message of the writing and thus requires the student to think deeper and add writing and/or rewrite rather than simply edit and/or correct (Kepner, 1991).

Surface-Level Written Feedback

In their study on the written feedback of Elementary and Middle School teachers, Clare, et al. (2000) found that most of the written feedback given by teachers was surface-level feedback. In 2007-2008 the average class size for secondary departmentally organized classes was 23.3, and the average for Minnesota was 25.5 (National Center for Education Statistics, Nd.). When these large class sizes are considered, it makes sense that teachers tend to give surface-level feedback. It would likely be difficult for a teacher to find time to provide significant content-level feedback to every student when class sizes are so large. This struggle with time is discussed by Lerner (2005). Though Lerner's work discusses the struggle to schedule conferences with students, the challenge of lack of time for adequate student feedback due to other responsibilities such as meetings, supervisory periods, extracurriculars and personal lives is valid for the purposes of discussing the challenges present in written feedback practices as well.

Ferris (1997), in a study of L2 post-secondary students, found that surface-level written feedback that pointed out grammar errors in student writing helped students make successful grammar edits in their writing. The work of Matsumura et al. (2002) echoes this, finding that when surface-level comments were given on writing mechanics, that students performed better in subsequent drafts on writing mechanics, though specific teaching of mechanics was also likely a factor. Kepner (1991) also focussed on L2 post-secondary students, but found the opposite results that Ferris (1997) did. Kepner (1991) found that surface-level correction of errors and reminders of rules/mechanics alone did not lead to any significant gains in writing proficiency.

It's important to note the findings of Knoblauch & Brannon (1981). They found that students identified by teachers as less experienced writers tended to edit differently than their classmates who were identified as more experienced writers. The study found that less experienced writers tended to limit the changes to their writing to surface-level edits. These less experienced writers were less likely to make changes that reimagined, re-examined, or restructured the meaning/message of their writing.

Content-Level Written Feedback

Clare et al. (2000) found that - though there was a tendency for the measurable level with regards to writing proficiency of students' drafts to stay consistent after resubmission - content-level feedback, when given, led to both longer and higher quality essays when compared to surface-level feedback for middle school students. Matsumura

et al. (2002) discovered similar results for third grade students; their research suggested that content-level feedback led to higher quality writing assignments in subsequent drafts.

These findings were echoed for students studying at the university-level as well. Kepner (1991) found that for L2 post-secondary level students, content-level comments led to higher achievement at both the surface- and content-level. The authors suggest a model for written feedback where teachers leave content-level comments along with encouragement in paragraph, sentence or phrase form. Another study of a similar population was more specific about the type of content-level feedback, finding that questions asking for more information were helpful for some students and that comments phrased as statements were not as helpful (Ferris, 1997). Olson & Raffeld (1987) also found similar results in a study of 66 post-secondary students in a freshman-level course. The students in this study who were given content-level feedback ended up writing better essays than those who were given surface-level feedback. The authors suggested this was due to the fact that "...the content comments modeled the process that skilled writers follow as they revise their papers, this is, writing, reading what they have written, identifying problem areas of their papers that need clarifying, restructuring, expanding or deleting, and using strategies to deal with the problems" (Olson & Raffeld, 1987, p. 285). Therefore, it's clear that content-level comments are not simply a corrective tool, but can also be utilized as a tool for instruction.

Conferences

Student-teacher conferences are an excellent way to provide individualized feedback on student writing at both the surface- and content-levels. Cohen (1990) defines

conferences as "the term used to describe one-to-one consultation between teacher and student during the evolution of a composition…" (p. 109) Harris (1986) characterizes conferences as "...opportunities for highly productive dialogues between writers and teacher-readers…" (p. 3) Though all conferences involve a face-to-face interaction between teacher and student, there are multiple types of conferences. Pedagogical practices with regards to student-teacher conferencing have varied across time. Black (1998) traces a history of conferencing ideologies, including teacher-led conferences, student-centered conferences as well as more recent discussions that include an acknowledgement of and intentional attempt at subverting power-relationships between teachers and students. In order for conferences to be effective, teachers must position themselves not simply as a coach, but as an interested reader of the student's writing (Harris, 1986; Monette & Wolf, 1999; Edwards & Pula, 2008; Hale, 2018; Hawkins, 2019). Positioning oneself as an interested reader places the student's work, and therefore the student, at the center of the discussion. In order for a teacher to authentically position themselves in this way, it's essential for a strong student-teacher relationship to be formed.

The Importance of the Student-Teacher Relationship

The student-teacher relationship is central in the writing conference. Consalvo & Maloch (2015) discuss a massively important factor in the effectiveness of conferences by highlighting the importance of trusting student-teacher relationships and classroom community on the effectiveness of conferences as a method of feedback on student writing. Hawkins (2019) states that teachers must practice differentiation by designing

and conducting conferences with students based on individual needs as well as goals that are unique to each particular student. It is therefore possible that each conference might be designed or conducted differently based on the individual student that the teacher is working with. In order to do this effectively, a strong teacher-student relationship is required, as the teacher must know each student's individual strengths, weaknesses, needs, and tendencies.

Consalvo & Maloch (2015) also found that consistency with regards to structure and positive interaction with students led to the building of trust as well as positive relationships in the classroom community, which in turn led to more effective student-teacher conferences. Lerner (2005) had similar findings, highlighting how the practice of conferencing can, in and of itself, be a tool for developing student-teacher relationships. His work highlights the challenges of post-secondary instructors to find time for conferences amid hectic schedules and other responsibilities. Though he acknowledges that secondary teachers also struggle to find the time to conference with students, Lerner suggests that secondary teachers are better positioned to incorporate student-teacher conferences as a consistent pedagogical practice because they interact with students more frequently.

The Effectiveness of Student-Teacher Writing Conferences

Edwards & Pula (2008) observed two teachers who put into practice student-teacher conferences where they positioned themselves as an interested reader and were therefore able to respond to students in real-time. They found that students were engaged and that the process yielded positive effects for students. Graham et al. (2011),

in a review of several studies, highlights that conversational teacher feedback had positive impacts on student writing, thus suggesting that conferencing with students is an effective pedagogical tool for writing instruction.

Rose (1982) compares the effectiveness of student-teacher conferences with written feedback and finds that, in practice, conferences are more effective than written feedback. The student-teacher interaction allows the teacher to make sure that students understand the feedback that is being communicated as well as allowing time for the teacher to observe the student during the revision process and to comment on/guide said revision at the time that it is happening. These opportunities provided by the student-teacher conference allow for teachers to put into practice in real-time the teaching of understanding and utilizing teacher feedback as a tool for revision that Knoblauch & Brannon (1981) suggest are crucial for feedback to be effective.

Consalvo & Maloch (2015) report that focusing on content-level instead of surface-level errors during student-teacher writing conferences led to positive outcomes for students who were prone to resistance to the conferencing process. Hawkins (2019) had similar findings with primary students, stating that student-centered writing conferences were effective because they focused on helping students generate, think about and rehearse ideas/content. These findings go hand-in-hand with the work of Lain (2007), which highlights the importance of student engagement in and ownership over the writing and feedback process. Lain suggests that, if executed well, a student-teacher writing conference provides this type of ownership for students. This idea of ownership is present in the work of Hawkins (2019), which also suggests that the implementation of

these student-centered conferences helps to subvert the power dynamic which positions teachers as definitive, all-knowing experts and students as novices. Hawkins' findings serve as a later example of the power-aware ideologies that are discussed and advocated for in *Conversation, Teaching and Points in Between: The Confusion of Conferencing* by Black (1998).

Specificity, Text-Specific Feedback and Question Asking

Content-level feedback on student writing, regardless of the method of delivery, has generally been observed to be more effective than surface-level feedback. However, regardless of the type of feedback, specificity is important. Cohen (1990) takes his discussion of feedback within the Process Approach to writing further, advocating for the importance of clear, specific feedback. Ziv (1984), in their research on teacher comments on the writing of undergraduate students, also highlights the importance of specific/explicit comments over implicit/non-specific comments on student writing at both the micro- and macro-levels. Poulos & Mahoney (2008) found that student preferences aligned with Cohen and Ziv's calls for specific feedback.

This begs the question: what does this specific feedback entail? Sommers (1982) breaks this down further, highlighting the importance of comments that address the individual student's writing. Sommers writes that teachers should give text-specific comments, meaning feedback that is specific to the content of the student's writing rather than vague feedback that could be generalized for most writing in general. An example of a text-specific comment would be a suggestion to add specific examples to further describe an identified idea that a student is writing about whereas a vague comment

might be simply writing 'dig deeper.' Ferris (1997) observed that these types of text-specific comments helped student writing improve more than general, vague comments.

Wang et al. (2017) highlight the effectiveness and therefore importance of asking questions when providing feedback on student writing. They particularly advocate for the asking of questions that help students unpack ideas and develop nuance. Harris (1986) suggests that teachers should ask open-ended questions when conferencing with students. This is because these questions are, by nature, more likely to lead to the higher-order thinking that is required to develop writing in the way that Wang et al. are hoping for than basic yes/no questions. As mentioned earlier, the work of Ferris (1997) discusses how asking questions that requested students provide more information was seen to be helpful for some students. Ferris also found that student revisions that were in response to teacher requests that were formatted in the form of questions had a significant positive impact for over 50% of students, whereas comments phrased as statements weren't found to be as helpful. McIver & Wolf (1999) tie together the importance of text-specific feedback and questions. They state that teachers should ask students higher-level questions that are directly related to the students' writing and suggest that by answering these questions, students will ultimately provide clarity and add details to their writing.

Reflection and Rationale

Through my studies, academic field experiences and work in education, I have developed a strong understanding and belief in the power of student-teacher relationships. Learning is a messy process and it requires trust between individuals in the learning

community in order to be truly successful. I went into this research with the assumption that the results of others' work on this topic would show that the writing conference was all-powerful and that written feedback was archaic, unhelpful, and was a lazy cop-out for teachers of writing. I assumed this because of the fact that conferences require face-to-face, relational interactions. As an educator who has inconsistency in feedback procedures, I mentally prepared myself to read again and again about how my practices with regards to feedback were ineffective.

The research showed me that I was correct in my assumption that conferences tend to be more effective than written feedback. However, I was wrong about written feedback. Written feedback is still effective and helpful in certain situations with certain students. There are even times where surface-level written feedback was shown to have a positive impact, which was very surprising to me. However, this makes total sense when taking into account the diversity of learners and learning styles that are present in classrooms all around the world. In my own classroom, I have had students who struggle with surface-level errors who have improved their writing when these surface-level comments were made. It appears that when teachers follow best practices for feedback and adjust their feedback to meet the learning goals for each individual student, that students improve their writing.

"Improvement" is a key word here. The Process Approach and Workshop Model provide a foundation for the practice of teaching writing where the journey of creating a piece of writing involves multiple attempts, mistakes and growth (Calkins, 1986; Cohen, 1990). The teacher acts as a coach/guide, supporting each individual student along this

journey of growth towards the creation of their final product. I very much appreciate this suggested role as someone who coaches basketball at the school where I teach. I have found that my experiences in the classroom often inform the decisions that I make as a basketball coach. Moving forward, it seems that my work as a basketball coach may serve to inform the way that I teach writing. Just as I do on the court for athletes, I will serve as a writing coach for students, guiding them through practice as they work towards creating their final product. Whether on the court or in the classroom, feedback is an essential part of this growth process. It's therefore of paramount importance for teachers to understand and employ best practices with regards to feedback on student writing. The ultimate results of this work being done effectively at the classroom level will be an improvement in student writing skills that will be reflected at the classroom, school, district, state and national levels.

This national-level improvement is measured by standardized assessment data. Reflection and discussion of this data is important and are, all-too-often, lacking when data from standardized assessments are utilized in order to support an argument or theory. Due to the fact that I researched and utilized standardized assessment data in the beginning of this chapter, I feel that it is my responsibility to provide some of this type of reflection.

When discussing anything connected with education, I am always hesitant to refer to standardized assessment data. Assessment data works much like a thermometer does in medical practice. A high temperature is a pretty good indicator that a patient is sick, but doesn't warrant a specific diagnosis. Rather, more tests need to be done and more

symptoms need to be examined before a diagnosis is made. In education, test scores should serve as a thermometer. If test scores are low, this is an indicator that things need to be further looked into and that practice may need to be adjusted. However, I believe that low test scores are not an end-all-be-all diagnostic for a failing school or system, yet are irresponsibly used as such an identifier by those in power at multiple levels within education.

This being said, in our current system of education, more nuanced data is difficult to come by and therefore, adjustments need to be made at the classroom level based on the data that is available. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, many students across the United States have scored below proficient on a national writing assessment. This "high temperature" of low writing scores, if I may extend my previously-used metaphor, warrants research and potential adjustment of practice at the classroom level. If the school system is sick, more examination needs to happen before a specific cause and diagnosis can be identified. These identifications are essential in order for an effective treatment to be implemented.

Though the American political machine will likely continue to churn out new standards and educational policy packages every couple of years, it has been my belief since I began my study of education as an undergraduate that the most impactful changes in education come from the bottom up. What teachers do in their classroom each day is what ultimately impacts students. It takes hard work, patience, and modesty to examine, research and adjust day-to-day teaching practice. But, if real gains are going to be made in student writing skills, this work is essential. I hope that the research done in my

classroom about how to improve writing feedback practices in order to help students grow as writers will add to this body of work. I hope that, throughout my career, the impacts of my practice in my own classroom will, along with that of other teachers, trickle up and create change.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with an examination of the Common Core State Standards for writing as well as the most recently available results from the NAEP writing assessment. The Common Core State Standards provide a backdrop for writing instruction, as they provide specific writing skills that will be assessed. The NAEP scores showed that a large portion of students nationally were not meeting proficiency standards and therefore demonstrate a need for improving writing instruction.

Calkins' Workshop Model and Cohen's Process Approach were then discussed (Calkins, 1986; Cohen 1990). The role of the teacher and the importance of the student-teacher relationship in writing instruction was discussed along with the need for teachers to help students build their self-efficacy with regards to their writing skills. Written feedback was discussed, as it is the most common form of feedback given on student writing. Content- and surface-level feedback were then defined. Research that has been conducted on these two forms of feedback was examined and the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of both were analyzed.

Student-teacher writing conferences were defined and research on the topic was presented. The importance of student-teacher relationships for writing conferences to be effective as well as the potential for these conferences to help foster these relationships

was discussed. Following this discussion, research highlighting the effectiveness of writing conferences was examined and analyzed.

Following the section on conferences was a section that highlighted some best practices for feedback on student writing that can be incorporated by teachers into both written-feedback and conferences.

The chapter concluded with a reflection section. This section ended with a rationale for the research that will be conducted in order to answer the question: *How can I improve feedback on student writing in order to help students improve their writing skills?*

In the next chapter, I will provide the details regarding how I conducted research around my central question. I will present my research paradigm, the context of my study and the methods of research that were utilized.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction

This chapter will give an overview of the methods that were used for a mixed-methods study that was undertaken in order to answer the research question: *How can I improve feedback on student writing in order to help students improve their writing skills?* The primary data collected in this study was quantitative data that reflects changes in students' writing scores. Supplemental qualitative data regarding students' opinions and feelings about the two feedback practices studied was also collected.

First, the research paradigm will be presented. A pragmatic paradigm will be utilized for this mixed-methods study (Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D., 2018). The rationale for this paradigm's usage instead of a postpositivist paradigm, as defined in Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018), is also discussed. Next, both the quantitative and qualitative research methods for the study are presented. Following this is an examination of the research context of the study, including the setting, participants and timeline. Finally, there is an in-depth explanation of the methods and data analysis that were used for the study as well as ethical considerations that were taken in order to ensure the safety and confidentiality of all participants.

Research Paradigm

This study was a mixed-methods study that drew quantitative data from student scores on standards-based writing rubrics as well as qualitative data from student responses to questionnaires. Though much of the nature of the study itself aligns closely

with a postpositivist paradigm as outlined on pages 6-7 in Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018), the nature of the subject matter demanded awareness of and reflection on the messiness, complexity and individual nature of the daily practice of teaching. Therefore, the study more closely aligns with the pragmatic paradigm (Creswell J. W. & Creswell J. D., 2018, pp. 10-11). The results of this study adds to the academic conversation surrounding feedback on student writing. However, the results should not be taken as absolute truth. Teaching is inherently transformative in nature and thus teaching practice must continue evolving. Teaching styles, individual relationships with students, the make-up of student populations and a host of other factors affect educational outcomes. The results of the implementation of feedback practices by one teacher will likely differ somewhat from the results of the practice of another. Therefore, it should not be automatically assumed that the results of this study will reflect the results of a similar study in a different setting. This paradigm has been selected due to the inclusion of qualitative data regarding student opinions and feelings.

Research Methods

There were two methods for data collection for this study: the first method was quantitative and the second was qualitative. The first method was an experimental Study Method (Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D., 2018). This quantitative study examined the effects of two independent variables on student writing scores: written feedback and student-teacher conferences. Data collection consisted of measuring the change in writing scores on standards-based rubrics on the first submission (pre-feedback) and the second submission (post-feedback). The second method was a combination of pre- and

post-experiment questionnaires (Mills, 2014, pp. 93-94). These questionnaires asked

students to share their feelings about which feedback practice they prefer and which one

they believe better helps improve their writing.

Research Context

Before elaborating on the specific methods of data analysis utilized in this study,

it is important to understand the larger context of where the study took place. This section

includes an overview of the setting, the participants and the timeline of the research.

Setting

The school in which the study will be conducted is a high school serving students

in 9th through 12th grade. The current student enrollment is over 2700 students. The

school is located in a suburb of Minneapolis, MN with a population of ~42,000. The

demographic composition of the school during the 2016-2017 school year, which is the

most recent publicly available data, was 58.4% White, 12.5% Hispanic or Latino, 12%

Asian, 10.8% Black or African American, 0.8% American Indian or Alaskan Native,

0.1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 5.3% Two or More Races

(Minnesota Report Card, 2018). During the 2016-2017 school year, the student

population consisted of 7.6% English learners, 12.6% receiving special education

services, 0.5% homeless, and 30.1% receiving free/reduced-priced meals (Minnesota

Report Card, 2018).

Due to continued growth of the student population within the district, a massive

expansion of the school building occurred in the late 2010s. A block schedule is used for

instruction. The school uses an academy model where 9th grade students are placed into

one of two 9th grade academies where they take most of their classes. They then

self-select into academies that serve as their home base for 10th-12th grade. Each

10th-12th grade academy is centered around a field of study and has pathways which

include academy-specific courses that are required for graduation.

Participants

The study participants were students from two sections of mainstream-level Ninth

Grade English. Group A was made up of 17 students who were from diverse racial,

ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. All but one student were in the 9th grade. One

student was an older student who was retaking the class. None of the students from

Group A had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 plans. One student from

Group A is designated as an English Language Learner (ELL). Group B was made up of

18 students who were also from diverse racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

One student in Group B had an IEP and no students had 504 plans. No students in Group

B were designated as an ELL.

Timeline

This study took place over two units within a nine-week class, beginning in

September of 2020 and ending in November of 2020. Both writing assignments asked

students to identify a theme in a written work and provide evidence of the presence of

that theme as well as explanation of the evidence referenced. This study was completed

in a unique time that necessitates continually/quickly evolving practices. Due to the

COVID-19 pandemic, the school implemented flexible learning models. At any given

time, based on local COVID-19 case counts, classes would be held fully in-person,

participating in a 50% in-person hybrid model (A-day/B-day continual rotation), or fully

online learning. For the duration of this study, classes were held in a 50% in-person

hybrid model. The potential impacts of this flexible educational model on the study will

be discussed in Chapter 5.

Methods and Data Analysis

This study employed a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative data that was

collected was in the form of student writing scores. The change in these scores

throughout the duration of the study was analyzed. The qualitative data (i.e. student

answers on questionnaires) was supplementary to the scores and helped provide an

opportunity for student voice in the research.

Change in Student Writing Scores

Participants in the study completed two summative writing assignments. For each

writing assignment, students submitted their writing twice. Feedback was given on the

first submission, which students utilized while revising and rewriting for the second

submission. Each submission was scored on a standards-based rubric. The students then

edited/rewrote/redrafted their writing and resubmitted their work. The writing was scored

again based on the same rubric, with this final score being the students' final grade on the

writing. The quantitative data that was measured was the change in scores from the

students' first submission to their second submission. The increase or decrease in scores

was presented as +/- percentage change from their first score.

The two sections of Ninth Grade English that participated in the study were

labeled Group A and Group B. Group A participated in a student-teacher writing

conference for the first writing assignment (incorporating reflective question-asking by the teacher as well as a readthrough of the student's writing) and received written feedback for the second writing assignment (both surface- and content-level feedback along with a final note providing overall thoughts). Group B received written feedback and participated in a student-teacher writing conference in the opposite order. Having Group A and Group B receive feedback in the opposite order accounted for, and therefore eliminated, the threat to validity that comes with maturation of the groups during the study (Creswell J. W. & Creswell J. D., 2018, p.170).

Student Questionnaires

For qualitative data, student answers to pre- and post-experiment questionnaires were examined. Before the first written assessment was completed, students completed a questionnaire asking if they prefer written feedback or conferencing and which feedback they believe helps them improve their writing more. Students also had the option to add additional thoughts, feelings and opinions about teacher feedback on their writing. The reason for this open-ended response option was to give students an opportunity to respond/reflect openly and in their own words. It also provided an opportunity to collect discrepant data that helped develop a deeper understanding of student opinions, thoughts and feelings (Mills, 2014, p. 94). Students were given the same questionnaire after receiving both types of feedback.

The rationale for the inclusion of this data is that it provides space for student voice within the study. The field of education is inherently dynamic and evolving. While studying teaching practice, it is easy to forget that the most important educational

stakeholders are the students themselves. In giving students a prominent voice in this study by highlighting their opinions and feelings as data, the hope was to work to subvert the power imbalance that is present in both teacher feedback and research practices that places the teacher in a position of power over students (Creswell J. W. & Creswell J. D., 2018, p. 94; Black, 1998). The pre-study and post-study questionnaires are located in APPENDIX A and APPENDIX B, respectively.

This data was supplementary in nature to the quantitative data that was taken. There were two different threads of analysis that were drawn from this data. The first was whether or not direct experience with both types of feedback altered students' feelings and opinions regarding feedback practices. The second was an observation of the relationship between student answers to the questionnaires and the changes in writing scores presented in the quantitative data. It was directly observable whether student feelings and opinions aligned with the measured data.

Ethical Considerations

This study required the participation of adolescent students and the data that was collected is private. It was therefore essential to ensure strict ethical considerations and parameters were adhered to before, during, and after the completion of this study. Before any data was collected, approval from the Hamline Institutional Review Board (IRB) training took place. The study was explained verbally to students. Student participants and families of student participants filled out the Hamline University Informed Consent to Participate in Research form as required to meet ethical standards set forth by the IRB.

The Hamline University IRB research consent forms are located in Appendix E. The Student Research Consent forms are located in Appendix F.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methods that were used for a mixed-methods study, the results of which helped answer the question: *How can I improve feedback on student writing in order to help students improve their writing skills?*

The pragmatic research paradigm that was utilized for the mixed methods study was presented along with the rationale for its usage instead of a postpositivist paradigm (Creswell J. W. & Creswell J. D., 2018). The quantitative and qualitative research methods for the study were next presented. An overview of the context in which the research took place was then presented. Finally, was an in-depth explanation of the methods and data analysis that were used for the study, along with a discussion of ethical considerations that were taken.

The next chapter will examine the results of the mixed-methods study. Based on the background research conducted in preparation for this study and my own personal teaching experience, I predicted that students would generally report that they prefer written feedback over student-teacher conferences and that they would believe written feedback helps their writing improve more than conferences both before and after the study is completed, but that the student writing score data would suggest that student-teacher conferences were a more effective feedback method for helping students improve their writing skills.

CHAPTER FOUR

Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to report and analyze the data that was collected throughout the course of this study. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to help answer the question that is guiding this research: *How can I improve feedback on student writing in order to help students improve their writing skills?*

The chapter begins with a section that highlights some key data points from student responses to the pre- and post-study questionnaires. The following section discusses some of the most common types of feedback that were given to students on their first submissions. Then, there are two sections in which the rubric score data from the first and second assessments are presented. Finally, there is a section which discusses the overall results. By the end of this chapter, it will be clear that students did improve their writing throughout this process.

Student Responses to Questionnaires

On the pre-study questionnaire, which can be seen in Appendix A, a total of 31 students provided responses. In response to the first question, 22 students shared that they preferred written feedback while nine students shared that they preferred receiving feedback from a student-teacher conference. In the optional section where students were given the opportunity to share their thoughts, opinions or feelings, some students gave reasons for the choice that they made. The most common student responses from students who shared a preference for written feedback had to do with it being "quicker" and

"easier." The main reasons shared by students explaining a preference for student-teacher conferences had to do with the ability to ask questions to clarify understanding as well as the fact that conferences hold students accountable, while written feedback is often looked at once and then forgotten. It's important to note that one student indicated that they didn't really have a preference for either method in the additional comments section.

The second question on the pre-study questionnaire highlights a difference between student preferences and student opinions about the effectiveness of the two types of feedback. On this question, 16 students shared that they believed written feedback helps them improve their writing skills more, while 15 shared that they believed student-teacher conferences help more. In the optional section where students were given the opportunity to share their thoughts, opinions and feelings, there were two main reasons that were given for students stating that they believe that written feedback helps them improve their writing more. The first reason was that written feedback is visual. The second reason, which is connected with the first, is that students can go back and read the feedback again. Both of the main reasons given in this optional section of the questionnaire for the belief that student-teacher conferences help more were tied to the relationship and communication between the teacher and the student. The first of these reasons was a belief that having someone communicate with the student about their work helps them remember to complete it. The second main reason given was that a student-teacher conference helps make sure that the student understands the feedback that is being given.

The final question on the pre-study questionnaire gave students an opportunity to write any additional thoughts, feelings, or opinions about teacher feedback on writing. This question garnered no responses that were particularly notable.

On the post-study questionnaire, which can be seen in Appendix B, a total of 35 students provided responses. The preferences shared on the post-study questionnaire differed from the pre-study questionnaire, with 21 students sharing that they preferred receiving feedback via a student-teacher conference, while 14 students shared that they preferred receiving written feedback. In the optional section where students were given the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings and opinions, there were three common threads. The first had to do with understanding. Some students shared that written feedback can be confusing and that a student-teacher conference helps mitigate this challenge. The second and third reasons had to do with communication. Students shared that they liked that they are able to ask the teacher questions and that the teacher is able to give full explanations. There were two main reasons that were given in this section for students preferring written feedback. The first reason is that students are able to look back at the feedback, whereas in a conference, if the student didn't take notes, they have to remember the conversation. The second main reason given was that conferences can be a scary, intimidating process for students.

The second question on the post-study questionnaire also showed a change in student opinions. On this question, 25 students shared that they believed that receiving feedback via a student-teacher conference helps them improve their writing more, while 10 shared that they believed that written feedback helps more. The main reasons that

were expressed in the optional thoughts, feelings and opinions section by students who believed that conferences helped more were that student-teacher conferences helped more with understanding and that they allowed students to ask questions. The main reason given by students who believed that written feedback helped their writing more was that written feedback allows students to look at the feedback more than once.

In the final question on the post-study questionnaire, which gave students an opportunity to write any additional thoughts, feelings, or opinions about teacher feedback on writing, some students highlighted how they believe that both forms of feedback are helpful. One student responded that they don't like it when "feedback sounds condescending" because it makes them "feel like [they're] a child."

The following section will highlight some of the trends in feedback that was given to students during this study.

Feedback Given

The two writing assignments that students completed for this study both asked students to write a paragraph identifying a theme in a fictional text. Students needed to cite evidence from throughout the text that supported the theme and fully explain/elaborate on their reasoning. For the first assessment, students wrote about O. Henry's short story *The Gift of the Magi*. For the second assessment, students wrote about Elie Wiesel's book *Night*. The rubric for the first assessment is located in Appendix C. The rubric for the second assessment is located in Appendix D. for these assessments can be found in Appendix C and Appendix D. These rubrics were created based on

Minnesota State Writing Standards and have been adjusted over time by the members of

the school's 9th Grade English PLC (Professional Learning Community).

Though there were many specific, individual pieces of feedback given on student writing

throughout this process, there were some patterns that emerged in the types of feedback

that were given to students. There were four common threads in the feedback that was

given both in written form and via student-teacher conferences. The first two were

common surface-level feedback comments about citations and grammar. The second two

were common content-level feedback comments that had to do with theme statements,

conclusion sentences and elaboration.

Common Surface-Level Feedback

The two most common types of surface-level feedback that were given, other than

noting spelling errors, were connected with citations and grammar. As can be seen on the

rubrics for the first and second assessments in Appendices C and D, citations were a key

focal point in the scoring of certain rubric criteria for the assessments that were used in

this study. The most common surface-level feedback that was given to students about

citations had to do with the formatting of the quote. Students were often directed to

properly use quotation marks. Another common piece of feedback that was given to

students about citations was directing them to edit the punctuation in both the quote itself

and in the page number reference. In the student-teacher conferences, this was explained

verbally with the writing sample in front of the student. In written feedback, specific

corrections, like period placement for example, were directed in a comment. In the

written feedback for larger, multi-faceted corrections in citations, students were directed

to class materials available to them (posters, guides, etc.) that they could reference in order to make the needed corrections.

Feedback on grammar was a bit more complicated. As is indicated by the national-level test scores discussed in Chapter 1, students come to my classroom with varying levels of English language and writing proficiency, whether or not they are ELL students. Some students made occasional, small grammar mistakes, such as verb tense errors, that were easily pointed out with a comment stating the specific edit that needed to be made. In some other cases, student writing samples had grammar errors in nearly every sentence. Many of these errors were larger in scope, having to do with things such as basic sentence structure. In both written and student-teacher conferences, addressing these errors posed some challenges. The first challenge had to do with time. Forming adequate written feedback about these errors was time-consuming and addressing them fully in student-teacher conferences was nearly impossible given the time-frame that was necessitated by the daily bell schedule. The second challenge had to do with the feelings of the student. When there are many errors, oftentimes multiple errors per sentence, seeing written feedback for or hearing verbal reference to these errors may be demoralizing to students. I had to remind myself while giving this feedback, as is highlighted by Calkins (1986) and Cohen (1990), that the goal for every student wasn't necessarily perfection, but growth. There were some cases where I made the decision to, in a sense, choose my battles. In these cases, the main focus of this type of feedback had to do with overall readability and communication of message. Smaller errors, such as punctuation and spacing, weren't consistently commented on.

Theme Statements and Conclusion Sentences

Successful identification of the theme of the piece of writing that students were writing about was an important part of both rubrics, as can be seen in Appendices C and D. In the lessons leading up to the completion of the first assessment, students were taught a specific way to introduce a theme - the "Theme Statement." Students were taught the "Topic + Verb + Opinion" format. They were made aware that this format needed to be used in their upcoming assessments. Though most students were able to successfully utilize this format for their theme statements, there were many students who did not. One of the most common types of content-level feedback that was given to students was reminding them to use the "Topic + Verb + Opinion" format and directing them to the resources that were used in class to help teach the format, which were available to the students on Canvas.

Conclusion Sentences were only present on the second rubric (which is located in Appendix D). However, students were made aware that they were required to have conclusion sentences for both assessments. It was fairly common for students to forget conclusion sentences altogether. The content-level feedback in these cases were fairly straightforward; students were simply reminded that they needed to include a conclusion sentence. This addition led to a jump in scores for a few students on the second assessment, as students who didn't include a conclusion sentence scored a 0/4 on the *Theme/Conclusion* criteria. Another common challenge that students had with conclusion sentences is that they were too long. Some students had multiple sentences in this part of their paragraph, which in some cases ended up making up a significant percentage of

their overall writing. The content-level feedback that was given when this was the case

was also fairly straightforward. Students were encouraged to "be concise" or "do [their]

best to keep it to one sentence."

Elaboration

The most common challenge that students had with their writing, albeit in varying

levels of extremity, had to do with elaboration. As can be seen on the rubrics for both the

first and second assessments in Appendices C and D, thoughtful elaboration was a key

part of students' overall scores. One of the major challenges that Secondary English

teachers face, myself included, is trying to get students to analyze instead of summarize

in their writing. I approach this in the very beginning of 9th Grade English, teaching

students that, in most cases, explaining the "who, what, where and when" is

summarizing, while explaining the "how and why" is usually analyzing. I remind

students that when they are writing about literature to always ask themselves, "How/why

is this the case?" and to make sure that they are fully answering that question.

This was a widespread challenge for students. There were only a few students

who, on their first submissions of their assessments, fully explained how the textual

evidence that they were referencing supported their theme statement. Many students

partially or inconsistently elaborated. Many students, however, simply restated

(summarized) the evidence in their own words. When providing written feedback on

student writing that had inconsistent or incomplete elaboration, I frequently wrote

something along the lines of, "Make sure to fully explain how/why this evidence supports

the theme statement." The comment made on student writing that restated/summarized

the evidence in lieu of elaboration was similar. In these cases I wrote, "This is summary. Make sure to fully explain how/why this evidence supports the theme statement." In student-teacher conferences, similar comments were made, but I was able to check for student understanding in real time and to rephrase or re-explain as needed.

This feedback was only one part of the writing process (Calkins, 1986; Cohen, 1990). Now that some common feedback threads have been covered, it's important that the data from each assessment is examined, starting with the first assessment.

First Assessment

The first assessment asked students to write a paragraph highlighting a theme in O. Henry's short story *The Gift of the Magi*, cite textual evidence from throughout the story that supports the theme, and to fully explain how/why the evidence supports the theme. Student writings were scored on four rubric criteria: *Theme, Evidence, Elaboration,* and *Mechanics/Citations.* Each criteria was scored out of four points, for a maximum total of 16 points for the full assessment. The full rubric for this assessment is located in Appendix C.

For the first assessment, Group A received feedback by participating in student-teacher conferences and Group B received written feedback. Students received two scores. The first score was for the first submission (pre-feedback) and the second score was for the second submission (post-feedback). The data points in Table 1 and Table 2 are the average change in points on each rubric criteria between the first and second submissions for each group. This first assessment saw virtually no difference in overall average score percentage change between the student-teacher conference group

and the written feedback group. Group A had an average total score percentage change of 12.5% (2 rubric points). Group B had an average total score percentage change of 13.89% (2.23 rubric points).

The point differences for each of the rubric criteria for the first assessment are represented in these tables:

Table 1

Group A Average Change in Points on Rubric Criteria - First Assessment - Conferences

RUBRIC CRITERIA	AVERAGE CHANGE IN POINTS
Theme	0.765
Evidence	0.588
Elaboration	0.412
Mechanics/Citations	0.235

Table 2

Group B Average Change in Points on Rubric Criteria - First Assessment - Written Feedback

RUBRIC CRITERIA	AVERAGE CHANGE IN POINTS
Theme	0.278
Evidence	0.889
Elaboration	0.611
Mechanics/Citations	0.444

The difference in the effects of the two types of feedback becomes a little more clear when the average change in score on each individual rubric criteria is analyzed. As can be seen in Table 1 and Table 2, Group A's writing showed an average improvement of 0.765 points on the *Theme* criteria, which is much larger than the average improvement of 0.278 points that Group B showed on the same criteria. However, Group B showed an average change that was higher than Group A in the other three categories on this first assessment. For the *Evidence* criterion, Group A had an average points change of 0.588, while Group B had an average points change of 0.889. For the *Elaboration* criterion, Group A had an average points change of 0.412, while Group B had an average points change of 0.611. Finally, on the *Mechanics/Citations* criterion, Group A had an average points change of 0.235, while group B had an average points change of 0.444.

Second Assessment

The second assessment asked students to write a paragraph highlighting a theme in the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel, cite textual evidence from throughout the book that supports the theme, and explain how/why the textual evidence supports the theme. For this assessment, student writings were scored on five rubric criteria: *Theme/Conclusion, Evidence, Elaboration, Organization/Transitions,* and *Grammar/Mechanics + Citations.* Similar to the first assessment, each criteria was scored out of four points, making the total possible points for this assessment 20. The full rubric for this assessment is located in Appendix D.

For the second assessment, Group A received written feedback and Group B participated in student-teacher conferences. Each student again submitted their writing twice, receiving a score for the first submission (pre-feedback) and the second submission (post-feedback). The data points in Table 3 and Table 4 are the average change, in points, on each rubric criterion from the first to the second submission for each group. As was the case with the first assessment, the second assessment saw a negligible difference in overall average score percentage change between Group A and Group B's first and second submissions. Group A had an average percentage change of 11.76% (2.35 points), while Group B had an average percentage change of 13.33% (2.67 points). The point differences for each of the rubric criteria for the second assessment are represented in these tables:

Table 3

Group A Average Change in Points on Rubric Criteria - Second Assessment - Written Feedback

RUBRIC CRITERIA	AVERAGE CHANGE IN POINTS
Theme/Conclusion	0.529
Evidence	0.176
Elaboration	0.706
Organization/Transitions	0.353
Grammar/Mechanics + Citations	0.588

Table 4

Group B Average Change in Points on Rubric Criteria - Second Assessment -

Conferences

RUBRIC CRITERIA	AVERAGE CHANGE IN POINTS
Theme/Conclusion	0.556
Evidence	0.556
Elaboration	0.611
Organization/Transitions	0.167
Grammar/Mechanics + Citations	0.778

The individual rubric criteria scores, as they did with the first assessment, provide a more nuanced look into the effects of each type of feedback. As can be seen in Table 3 and Table 4, Group A's writing had an average improvement of 0.529 points on the *Theme/Conclusion* criteria while Group B's writing had an average improvement of 0.556 points. The largest difference in the scores from the second assessment was on the *Evidence* criteria, where Group A's writing had an average improvement of 0.176 points while Group A's writing had an average improvement of 0.556 points. On the *Elaboration* criteria, Group A's writing had an average improvement of 0.706 points and Group B's writing had an average improvement of 0.611 points. On the *Organization/Transitions* criteria, Group A's writing improved an average of 0.353 points, while Group B's writing improved an average of 0.167 points. On the

Grammar/Mechanics + Citations criterion, Group A's writing improved an average of 0.588 points, while Group B's writing had an average improvement of 0.778 points.

Overall Results

As is the case with the results of many studies in the field of education, the results of this study are a bit muddy, and even contradictory. Of the four rubric criteria that were similar for the two submissions, only one (*Elaboration*) showed a consistent, albeit small, result - being that written feedback seems to help improve scores slightly more than student-teacher conferences. The other three rubric criteria that were similar (the *Organization/Transitions* criteria on the second assessment rubric being the one that had no near-exact or exact equivalent on the first assessment rubric) showed inconsistent results.

The good news is that both types of feedback, on average, helped improve student writing scores on all rubric criteria. There were a few isolated incidents where students scored lower on a rubric criteria, but these incidences were far from the norm. A more common occurrence was a student scoring exactly the same on a criteria from one submission to the next.

It's interesting to note that there was a change in student opinion, as highlighted in the answers given on the pre- and post-study questionnaires. Initially, more students shared that they preferred written feedback over student-teacher conferences and the responses were nearly even as to whether or not students believed that written feedback or student-teacher conferences helped them improve their writing more. After the study, there was a clear shift in both areas. After participating in the study, student preferences

for feedback as well as student beliefs regarding which form of receiving feedback helps their writing improve more shifted towards student-teacher conferences.

This change in student opinion showing a shift in student preferences for and beliefs about the effectiveness of types of feedback is particularly interesting considering that it doesn't align with the overall average changes (or lack thereof) in student scores.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and analyzed the data that was collected during this study. The chapter began with a section that highlighted key data points from student responses to the pre- and post-study questionnaires. The second section discussed common feedback comments that were given on student writing during the study. The third and fourth sections laid out the student score data from the first and second assessments. The final section discussed the overall results of the study.

The ultimate goal of this examination of the data was to help answer the question: *How can I improve feedback on student writing in order to help students improve their writing skills?* The data clearly indicates that, on average, both feedback practices were successful in helping students improve their writing.

Reviewing and analyzing data is important. However, more in-depth discussion of the implications of the data is necessary. The following chapter will provide this.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to draw conclusions from and reflect on the data that was presented in Chapter Four. The guiding question for this whole project was: *How can I improve feedback on student writing in order to help students improve their writing skills?* By the end of this chapter, the question will be fully addressed and thus, this project will conclude.

This chapter begins with a section that reflects on how the findings of this study compare with the original hypothesis that was laid out at the end of Chapter Three. The second section compares the findings of this study with the literature review that was conducted in Chapter Two. The third section discusses some of the major limitations of the study as well as suggestions for ways to adjust future research in order to minimize these limitations. The fourth section discusses my future plans as an educator and researcher and also discusses how this research and process will impact myself and my students going forward.

Findings

One of the pieces of good news that has come out of this study is that the data for both student-teacher conferences and written feedback indicates that, on average, both types of feedback help students improve their writing. That being said, the results of this

study point to inconsistencies as to the level of improvement that can be expected from the implementation of each feedback practice.

As mentioned at the end of Chapter Three, I predicted that students would generally report that they prefer written feedback over student-teacher conferences and that they would believe written feedback helps their writing improve more than conferences both before and after the study is completed. I also predicted that the student writing score data would suggest that student-teacher conferences were a more effective feedback method for helping students improve their writing skills. Both of these parts of my hypothesis were proven, at least partially, to be incorrect.

Initially, as reported in Chapter Four, the pre-study questionnaire responses showed a preference for written feedback and a virtually even split as to which form of feedback was believed to be more effective. However, the post-study questionnaire responses showed a large shift in student preferences and in student opinions about the effectiveness of each type of feedback. A majority of students reported that they both preferred student-teacher conferences to written feedback and felt that student-teacher conferences were more effective. The fact that this shift in student opinions did not reflect the score data is an interesting phenomenon that will be discussed in the next two sections.

Findings Compared to the Review of the Literature

This study did not analyze the difference between surface-level and content-level feedback. Each student, whether participating in a student-teacher conference or receiving written feedback, was given both surface-level and content-level feedback. The

results of this study show that both types of feedback, when given together, regardless of the feedback method, are helpful. Much of the literature that was reviewed in preparation for this study examined either content-level or surface-level feedback, and predominantly found that both were at least somewhat effective (Ferris, 1997; Matsumura et al., 2002; Clare et al., 2000; Kepner, 1991; Olson & Raffeld, 1987). The gains in student scores that were seen in this study are therefore consistent with most of the findings on this topic referenced in Chapter Two.

The positive impact of student-teacher conferences on student scores that was observed in this study is consistent with the findings in the review that was done by Graham et al. (2011). The format of these conferences followed the suggestion, that can be garnered from the research of several scholars, that when the teacher is positioned as an interested reader in the student-teacher conference, that the process yields positive effects on student writing (Harris, 1986; Monette & Wolf, 1999; Edward & Pula, 2008; Hale, 2018; Hawkins, 2019).

The results of this study come into contrast with the work of Rose (1982), who found that student-teacher conferences were more effective at improving student writing than written feedback. However, the reasons that some students gave in the pre- and post-study questionnaires for preferring conferences as well as believing that conferences are more effective than written feedback reflect one of the suggestions made by Rose (1982). This suggestion was that student-teacher conferences allow the teacher to put into real-time the teaching of understanding and utilizing teacher feedback, which Knoblauch & Brannon (1981) argue are critical in order for feedback to be effective. As mentioned

in Chapter Four, a common student response in the optional sections asking for additional thoughts, feelings and opinions stated that students sometimes struggled to understand written feedback and that student-teacher conferences help them understand it better.

These student responses can also be connected, albeit somewhat tangentially, to the work of Ziv (1984) and Cohen (1990), in which they highlight the importance of specificity in feedback. The connection can be made when taking into account the work of Poulos & Mahoney (2008), which showed that student preferences aligned with these findings, stating that students showed a preference for specific feedback over non-specific feedback. As stated earlier, in the pre- and post-study questionnaires, some students expressed that they felt the student-teacher conferences helped them understand the feedback more. It can be inferred from these responses that the conversational nature of the student-teacher conference, which allows the teacher to respond to questions and to check for student understanding in real-time, enabled the feedback to be more clear and specific for students who otherwise may have been confused.

The struggle that teachers face to give adequate content-level feedback to students due to time constraints connected with class sizes that was pointed out by Lerner (2005) became very apparent in the completion of this study. Providing thorough written feedback to a large group of students was a several-hour commitment, which, by necessity, took place largely outside of contracted teaching hours. Providing complete, specific and thorough feedback via student-teacher conferences was also a challenge, as the amount of time that was able to be set aside for student-teacher conferences was limited by the confines of the daily bell schedule.

The shift in student opinions from a preference for written feedback in the pre-study questionnaire to a preference for student-teacher conferences in the post-study questionnaire could be due at least somewhat to the topics discussed by Black (1998) and Hawkins (2019). Both highlight the inherent power-over dynamic that is present in the student-teacher relationship and how student-teacher conferences, if conducted in a responsible, intentional, student-centered fashion can work to subvert this power dynamic. This study was conducted within the first nine weeks of a new school year and therefore, the student-teacher relationships between myself and students were relatively new and still developing. Therefore, there is a good chance that, at the beginning of the study, many students were intimidated by or uncomfortable with the idea of meeting one-on-one with me. It is also very possible that some of this discomfort came from uneasiness connected to the power-over dynamic that is discussed above. It is possible that through participation in the student-teacher conferences, many student-teacher relationships were strengthened and/or that some students felt empowered by the process, therefore leading to the preference shift that was observed in the answers on the questionnaires.

With this in mind, the research of Consalvo & Maloch (2015), which discusses the enormous importance of trusting student-teacher relationships and classroom community on the effectiveness of student-teacher conferences as a method of providing feedback on student writing, provides an interesting and hopeful look into the possible implications of the use of this practice on myself and these specific students going forward. If the shift in student opinions discussed above is even partially a result of

strengthened student-teacher relationships due to the student-teacher conferences themselves, then perhaps these strengthened student-teacher relationships will, in turn, help future student-teacher conferences between myself and these students to be more effective.

Reflections

In this section, I will share and explain my big-picture takeaways from this research. This will incorporate some specific challenges that are facing secondary-level English teachers and potential steps that can be taken in order to address these challenges.

Grammar instruction

One thing, as mentioned previously, that many students struggled with during this study was standard grammar. Things that, to an English teacher may seem simple, such as capitalizing letters and properly utilizing punctuation at the end of sentences were often mistaken by students, especially in their first drafts. I would wager that an enormous percentage of secondary-level English teachers across the country would highlight errors like these as common mistakes that students make.

I have a hypothesis as to why this is the case. The explosion of social media and other online platforms means that students have access to an endless stream of potential reading and writing opportunities. This access to technology and internet connectivity has many benefits. However, the nature of the writing and reading that is happening through these platforms likely means that these habits of utilizing grammar that doesn't fit into the standard academic mold will continue to be present in student writing going forward.

I personally find this frustrating, as I'm sure many teachers do. However, it is important that the educational community react in a way that is responsible and reasonable. The best way to combat this challenge is to improve and increase direct instruction of sentence-level grammar. This should happen at all levels and this instruction should be incorporated into writing instruction. As can be seen in the data from this study, feedback on student writing can be a powerful tool for helping students fix their errors. However, feedback is only part of the solution. Teachers must use assessment data to pinpoint specific grammatical challenges that students are having and utilize these observations in order to develop lessons that explicitly teach the skills that their students need to improve on. This teaching can take place at the classroom level if most students are having similar challenges, in small groups if only some are having similar challenges, or at the individual level if individual students have specific/unique needs. The student-teacher conference is a powerful tool for providing this instruction at the individual level. This idea leads into my next reflective point, which discusses the drawbacks and strengths of each type of feedback that was studied.

Benefits, Drawbacks and a Flexible Solution

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, it's clear from the data that both forms of feedback were, on average, effective at helping students improve their rubric scores. However, there were many students who demonstrated no improvement on certain rubric criteria. The student responses to the pre- and post-study questionnaires provide some consequential insight as to how this issue might be addressed. Based on the student responses discussed in Chapter Four, it can be observed that many of the strengths of

each form of feedback balance out many of the weaknesses in the other. For example, some students shared that they felt that written feedback is helpful because they are able to reference it again later on, whereas if the feedback is given verbally by the teacher, students may forget it. Some students also shared their beliefs that a student-teacher conference is helpful because it enables the teacher and student to communicate in real time so that the student can fully understand the feedback, while simply having written feedback isn't as helpful if it's written in a way that students cannot understand. It's clear that while both feedback practices are beneficial individually, utilizing both would virtually eliminate these two drawbacks. The written feedback could be referenced again, while the student-teacher conference could be utilized to check for and bolster understanding of the written feedback. Perhaps the biggest takeaway from this research that will impact my practice is the realization that, based on the hard score data and student responses, it's clear that best practice in most cases is a flexible utilization of both feedback practices.

In this case, "flexible" has to do with differentiation. Every student is different and therefore has different needs. If good written feedback is given to all students, some students will understand it and will not need much face-to-face conference time with me as a teacher. Some students will be able to edit their work based on the written feedback, but may need some guidance in the form of a short conference or a response to a question. Some students will require a lot of student-teacher conference time in order to understand the feedback and to learn strategies for implementing it. When each student

receives what they need, the number of students whose writing shows little or no growth between submissions will lessen.

A potential way to implement this flexible, differentiated conference-time into a writing workshop-style class period would be to have students indicate their self-assessed level of need (adjusted at the teacher's professional discretion) and for the teacher to conference with students accordingly. Students who feel that they don't need any time spent meeting with their teacher, can work independently, perhaps with ongoing progress monitoring-style check-ins and opportunities for questioning as needed. Students who feel that they might need a little bit of guidance can have scheduled student-teacher conferences that are based around answering student questions. The students who indicate that they feel they need a lot of help, or students who are identified by the teacher as needing a lot of help, can meet with the teacher individually for longer, more in-depth student-teacher conferences. In this scenario, each student receives a foundation of thorough written feedback and is getting an amount of additional student-teacher conferencing support based on their individual level of need.

Class Sizes

One of the major challenges to the implementation of this flexible, differentiated feedback strategy has to do with class sizes. This strategy is most feasible and is likely to be most successful with a smaller class because the teacher is able to spend more time working individually with each student. However, as is the case in many American public school classrooms, large class sizes limit the amount of contact with each individual student. Large class sizes posed a significant challenge during this study due to the fact

that conducting in-depth student-teacher conferences with so many students takes a lot of time. It is unlikely that class sizes will significantly decrease in the coming years, so this challenge will continue to be present for myself and countless other teachers. This flexible student-teacher feedback model helps combat this challenge, but does not eradicate it. It will be important for myself and other teachers to continually adapt and reflect in order to find and implement feedback methods that work best for our students.

Limitations and Solutions

Though a lot of insight can be gained from the examination of this research and it certainly adds to the academic conversation surrounding feedback practices, there were undoubtedly some limitations to this study. This section will give an overview of some of these limitations and will provide suggestions for solutions that will eliminate these limitations in similar studies going forward.

Limitations

One of the major limitations that this study presented had to do with the sample size. Thirty-five students participating in a study conducted by one teacher in one classroom provides enough data for a significant and relevant examination of the effectiveness of the feedback practices. However, it cannot be responsibly assumed that the data trends observed in this study would be exactly replicated in a larger study with a larger sample size.

A second limitation has to do with the length of the study. This study provided a snapshot of the data from two assessments in two classes in one quarter of one year in a single school. Though any data is important to take into account when researching a

topic, the relatively small time frame of this study means that more longitudinal data of the same students, which would provide a more comprehensive picture of their progress as writers based on feedback practices was not observed.

A third limitation of this study has to do with the nature of the environment within which the study was conducted. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the school where this study took place was in a Hybrid model of learning, where students were in the classroom on half of the days. This meant that, by necessity, a lot of schoolwork was completed at home. Though students had opportunities to work on the writing assessments whose scores were utilized for data in this study while in school, many also worked on these assessments outside of school. There were two times where I was made aware that students were given help by other teachers on their writing. There were likely also times where parents, siblings or other students helped study participants on their writing assessments. It is also quite possible that students utilized resources on the internet for writing help. These are realities that are hard to eliminate within a regular school context such as this. However, I believe that they are, all-in-all, net positives. With improvement and growth being the ultimate goal that I have for students in my classroom, I support student utilization of any academically honest strategy or pathway for improvement and learning.

A fourth limitation, the fact that different rubrics that were used for the two submissions within the study, is also connected to the environment within which the study was conducted, albeit less directly. The class within which this study was completed is a class that is taught by several teachers who collaborate within a

Professional Learning Community (PLC). One of the things that is required of PLCs at the school where this study took place is that teachers who are teaching the same course have summative assessments that are completely aligned with one-another. This means that, as a teacher of this class, I was required to use the exact same rubrics for assessments as the other members of the PLC. Fortunately, the two rubrics that were used for this study were similar in many aspects and the writing assignments themselves were virtually the same. However, the fact that the rubrics were different in some ways, as can be seen in Appendices C and D, means that the data from each of the submissions should not be used as total and complete indicators of the trends present in the effectiveness of feedback on student writing.

A fifth limitation of this study is the fact that I was the only teacher who was scoring and responding to student writing. With only one person scoring, there is a large potential for error.

Finally, it would be irresponsible as an educator and researcher not to at least mention the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic potentially had on the data. The Hybrid Model that was in place during this study due to COVID-19 has already been discussed. However, the pandemic's potential effects on students go much deeper than unique scheduling challenges. This study took place during a time when educational communities and the larger communities in which they are a part of were dealing with an unprecedented amount of tumult and uncertainty. These challenges, as is the case with virtually every macro-level challenge, disproportionally affects communities who lack access to resources. This means that students of color, students who are from recent

immigrant communities and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were and are likely dealing with more challenges brought on by the pandemic than many of their peers. The effects of this uncertainty along with the fear, isolation, economic hardship, mental health struggles and a host of other challenges that students were dealing with may not have had directly measurable effects that could be observed or accounted for within the parameters of this study. However, this doesn't mean that the effects weren't present under the surface. They undoubtedly were.

Solutions

The way to address the limitations of the sample size and length of the study is simple. Future studies that are similar to this study should aim to have larger sample sizes. Not only should they have more students participating, but they should include more teachers and, if possible, more schools. These studies should also aim to take place over longer periods of time. The more data that can be analyzed, the better.

The learning environment is a little harder to control, and some may argue that it shouldn't be controlled, as learning is inherently dynamic and takes place inside and outside of school. However, it would be interesting to compare the data of this study with a study in which students are closely supervised while writing in a controlled environment where the possibility of outside influence and help is eliminated.

The issue of the difference in rubrics that was mentioned above can be easily addressed within a different context. If a similar future study is conducted where a teacher has the ability to use the same rubric for multiple assessments, this limitation could be eliminated. Completing such a study would present the opportunity for

juxtaposition of the data sets that would lead to a more nuanced understanding of the effects of rubrics within this research context.

In order to address the issue of reliability of student scores that was present in this study due to the fact that only one teacher/researcher was scoring student work, future studies should have multiple teachers/researchers scoring student work. This would drastically reduce the potential for scoring errors, as it would allow for student work to be re-examined if the scores given by different teachers/researchers are inconsistent.

The inherent limitations present due to this study taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic can be addressed, in theory, by conducting similar research once the pandemic is in the past. However, it should be noted that once the virus is eradicated, that the effects of it that were discussed in the above section will continue to be present. The fact of the matter is that macro-societal challenges such as this can never totally be controlled or accounted for within educational studies. Though the COVID-19 virus will someday no longer be a challenge that preoccupies the minds of educational stakeholders on a daily basis, there will always be large-scale challenges present that will directly or indirectly affect school communities. It's important that these challenges be acknowledged by researchers and that continued research is done over time in order to get the best sense of what best practices are so that teachers can do the best that they can in the times that they are teaching.

Plans for Future Research and Practice

There are many different areas of potential future research that have arisen from the completion of this study. This study focussed on comparing the effects of

student-teacher conferences and written feedback, but did not study different practices for both forms of feedback. Future studies that look into different written and conferencing feedback practices would help identify specific, effective feedback strategies that can be implemented by teachers in classrooms.

Another area for potential future research could look into the effects of different feedback strategies on student scores for different types of writing. The assessments used for this study were both focussed on literary analysis. It would be interesting to see if the results of this study were replicated when different types of student writing are assessed.

Something that this study did not examine at all was peer-to-peer feedback. Future studies could examine the effectiveness of this practice both on its own and in combination with other feedback practices.

As of right now, I have no immediate plans to conduct formal research in the near future. Rather, I'm greatly looking forward to focussing all of my time and energy on developing as a classroom teacher and as a high school basketball coach. However, my learning from the research that was done to inform this study and the results of the study itself have already and will continue to greatly inform my teaching. I plan to continue to utilize researched best practices and data to inform and adjust my feedback on student writing as well as other pedagogical practices.

What's more important than data, though, are the skills that I've learned through the process of conducting this research and reflecting on the data. This process has challenged me immensely as a teacher, learner and researcher. I am proud that I have completed research that can add to an important discussion within the field of education.

Completing this research has greatly improved my ability to collect, organize, and utilize data in order to reflect on and improve my own teaching practice. Considering that my primary role in the foreseeable future will be as a teacher, I am most proud of the fact that the completion of this project has informed and strengthened my capabilities in these areas.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to provide some final reflections in order to provide a conclusion to this project. The first section of this chapter discussed how the results of this study compared with the hypothesis that I presented at the end of Chapter Three. The following section placed this study in conversation with the greater research context. The third section discussed limitations of my research and suggested solutions that could be implemented in future research on the topic in order to minimize these limitations. The fourth section discussed what my path looks like going forward and how this research as well as the lessons learned from the process will impact my future as an educator.

The guiding question for this research project was: *How can I improve feedback on student writing in order to help students improve their writing skills?* It's clear that the answer to this question has two parts. The first part of the answer is that I should provide feedback in both written and conference form, as both have been seen to be effective and the strengths of each appear to help make up for the other's weaknesses. The second, and most important part of the answer, doesn't come directly from the data, but from the lessons learned through the process of conducting the research itself. In order to improve feedback on student writing, or to improve any part of my teaching practice, it is essential

that I continue to self-reflect, learn and respond to the individual needs of my students, just like I did during the process of completing this research.

      Teaching is a challenging, ever-changing and fulfilling profession. I look forward to continuing to do this work.

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Appendix A

Pre-Study Questionnaire

Name:

1.   Which form of feedback on your writing do you prefer to receive?

Choice 1: Written Feedback

Choice 2: Conference with your teacher

(Optional) Write any additional thoughts, opinions or feelings about this:

2.   Which form of feedback on your writing do you think helps you improve your writing skills the most?

Choice 1: Written Feedback

Choice 2: Conference with your teacher

3.   (Optional) Write any additional thoughts, opinions or feelings about teacher feedback on your writing:

Appendix B

Post-Study Questionnaire

Name:

1.   After receiving both forms of feedback, which form of feedback on your writing do you prefer to receive?

Choice 1: Written Feedback

Choice 2: Conference with your teacher

(Optional) Write any additional thoughts, opinions or feelings about this:

2.   Which form of feedback on your writing do you think helps you improve your writing skills the most?

Choice 1: Written Feedback

Choice 2: Conference with your teacher

3.   (Optional) Write any additional thoughts, opinions or feelings about teacher feedback on your writing:

Appendix C

First Assessment Rubric

After reading the story, determine a central theme. Then, in an organized paragraph support this theme using <u>two</u> pieces of textual evidence and elaborate on each piece of evidence. Remember to cite!

	Not Met	Basic (1)	Developing (2)	Proficient (3)	Exemplary (4)
Theme		A theme is stated but is not central to the story.	A central theme is stated but is too vague or too specific.	A central theme is expressed clearly.	A central theme is expressed precisely, clearly and creatively.
Evidence		Evidence supports the stated theme.	Relevant evidence supports the stated theme.	Relevant evidence from throughout the text supports the stated theme.	Precise and relevant evidence from throughout the text supports the stated theme.
Elaboration		Elaboration restates the evidence.	Elaboration inconsistently or simplistically explains how the evidence	Elaboration explains how the evidence supports the theme.	Elaboration explains how the evidence supports the theme and moves the

Mechanics/Citations		Grammar, usage and mechanics errors distract from the content. Citations are inconsistent or not present.	Grammar, usage and mechanics are inconsistent, but do not distract from the content. Citations are inconsistent.	Grammar, usage and mechanics are mostly correct. In-text citations are mostly formatted correctly.	Grammar, usage and mechanics are consistently correct. In-text citations, both paraphrased and quoted, are formatted correctly.

Theme Paragraph Total ____ 16

Appendix D

Second Assessment Rubric

Summative Assessment on Theme for Elie Wiesel's *Night:*

Standard: 9.5.2.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details.

After reading *Night* by Elie Wiesel, write a theme statement for *Night* and support it by showing its development over the course of the text.

Using your novel, be sure to:
·   Begin with TAG
.   State the theme in one sentence (preferably starting with an –ing word)
·   Demonstrate how the theme emerges through
1.   Beginning example (cite and explain) " _____" (3-46).
2.   Middle example (cite and explain) " _____" (47- 86).
3.   End example (cite and explain)   " _____" (87-115).
·   Conclude with a sentence that re-states/references your theme but does not repeat word-for-word or use the same sentence structure.
·   Write in paragraph form (minimum of 8 total sentences for the whole paragraph)
Grading Rubric (follow your non-negotiables in writing):

	Not Met	Basic (1)	Developing (2)	Proficient (3)	Exemplary (4)

THEME/ **CONCLUSION**		**A theme is stated but is not central to the story.** **A conclusion is attempted.**	**A central theme is stated but is too vague or too specific.** **Conclusion may provide an unclear ending or leaves the reader with questions.**	**A central theme is expressed clearly. Conclusion provides a clear ending.**	**A central theme is expressed precisely, clearly and creatively.** **Conclusion clearly provides an ending to the paper that leaves an impact on the reader.**
EVIDENCE		**Evidence attempts to support the research question but may leave the reader with questions.**	**Relevant evidence is used to support the claim/theme.**	**A sufficient amount of relevant evidence from throughout the text is used to support the claim/theme.**	**A sufficient amount of precise and relevant evidence from throughout the text is used to support the claim/theme.**
ELABORATION		**Elaboration restates the evidence.**	**Elaboration inconsistently or simplistically explains how the evidence supports the claim/theme.**	**Elaboration explains how the evidence supports the claim/theme.**	**Elaboration uses inferences and insight to explain how the evidence supports the claim/theme and moves the reader to a deeper understanding.**
ORGANIZATION / ** **TRANSITIONS			**Transitional phrases inconsistently or simplistically connect ideas.** **Organization of writing leaves the reader with questions.**	**A variety of transitional phrases connect ideas.** **Organization of writing is logical.**	**A variety of transitional phrases are used to purposely help the reader to see how ideas connect and build upon one another.** **Organization of writing is logical and supports the reader's growing understanding**

					across the whole of the analysis.
GRAMMAR/ MECHANICS + CITATIONS		**Demonstrates little control of standard writing conventions Frequent, significant errors impede readability.** **Citations are inconsistent. Signal tags are attempted to introduce evidence.**	**Demonstrates limited control of standard writing conventions** **Errors begin to impede readability.** **Citations are inconsistent.** **Signal tags are attempted to introduce evidence.**	**Demonstrates control of standard writing conventions** **Minor errors, while perhaps noticeable, do not impede readability.** **In-text citations, both paraphrased and quoted, are formatted correctly.** **A variety of signal tags are used effectively to introduce evidence and establish credibility.**	**Demonstrates exceptionally strong control of standard writing conventions and uses them effectively to enhance communications** **Errors are so few and so minor that they do not hinder readability.** **In-text citations, both paraphrased and quoted, are formatted correctly.** **A variety of signal tags are used effectively to introduce evidence and establish credibility.**

Total Score: _____/20

Appendix E

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

HAMLINE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The student researcher or faculty researcher (Principal Investigator) will provide you with a copy of this form to keep for your reference, and will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions.

This form provides important information about what you will be asked to do during the study, about the risks and benefits of the study, and about your rights as a research participant.

● If you have any questions about or do not understand something in this form, you should ask the research team for more information.

● You should feel free to discuss your potential participation with anyone you choose, such as family or friends, before you decide to participate.

● Do not agree to participate in this study unless the research team has answered your questions and you decide that you want to be part of this study.

● Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time.

Title of Research Study: Feedback in Practice: The Effects of Written Feedback and Conferences on Student Writing Scores in Ninth Grade English Classrooms.

Student Researcher: Anthony Granai – agranai01@hamline.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Joe Lewis, PhD – 651-523-2659 – jewlis06@hamline.edu

1. What is the research topic, the purpose of the research, and the rationale for why this study is being conducted?

The topic of this study is feedback on student writing. The purpose of the study is to examine the effects of two different feedback practices on student writing scores as well as to gather and understand student opinions about feedback on their writing. The rationale for this study stems from the researcher's belief in the importance of classroom-level research, the results of which can help

inform day-to-day teaching practice. As an English teacher, the researcher understands the enormous importance of helping students develop strong writing skills. The desire to conduct this study stems from the researcher's personal goal to improve his instructional practice in order to help students develop these skills.

2. What will you be asked to do if you decide to participate in this research study?

During the first quarter of the 2020-2021 school year, participants will fill out two short questionnaires and complete two writing assessments that are part of the English 9 curriculum. The first short questionnaire will be answered by participants before any of the studied writing assessments take place. For each of the writing assessments, participants will submit a draft of their writing and will receive feedback on that draft. Participants will then be asked to edit their work for a final submission. Throughout the course of the study, each participant will receive both written feedback and participate in a student-teacher conference. For example, if a participant received written feedback for their first writing assessment, then s/he will participate in a student teacher conference for the second writing assessment. After both writing assessments are complete, participants will fill out a second short questionnaire. Participant scores on the writing assessments and responses to the questionnaires will be analyzed.

3. What will be your time commitment to the study if you participate?

Each questionnaire should take no more than five minutes to complete and time will be given in class for participants to complete the questionnaires. Reviewing written feedback will likely take 5-10 minutes. Conferences will take between 5 and 15 minutes. Completion of the questionnaires, participation in the feedback practices (written or conference) and the completion/editing of writing assessments are normal day-to-day classroom activities for English 9 and therefore will take no additional time for participants.

4. Who is funding this study?

This study is being conducted without funding.

5. What are the possible discomforts and risks of participating in this research study?

By participating in this study, there is a small chance of participants feeling uncomfortable due to being asked questions about their feelings and opinions regarding an instructional practice. There is also a small chance of participants feeling uncomfortable discussing their writing in a conference with their teacher.

Loss of confidentiality is always a risk with educational research, but steps will be taken to store all identifying participant information securely in order to protect confidentiality. In addition, there may be risks that are currently unknown or unforeseeable. Please contact me at agranai01@hamline.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Joe Lewis at jlewis06@hamline.edu or 651-523-2659 to discuss this if you wish.

6. How will your privacy and the confidentiality of your data and research records be protected?

All data and information collected in physical form will be stored either in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office space at Shakopee High School, on their person, or in a locked drawer in the researcher's home. All data and information collected digitally will be stored on the researcher's Hamline University Google Drive or on Shakopee Public School's Canvas platform. Conferences with students will not be recorded. Study participants will be given pseudonyms. All written results will use pseudonyms. A key linking direct identifiers and pseudonyms will be made using Microsoft Excel that will be stored on the hard drive of the researcher's personal computer, to which access is protected by password. Upon completion of the study, the key will be deleted.

7. How many people will most likely be participating in this study, and how long is the entire study expected to last?
The study is likely to include 30-60 student participants. The study will last for much of the duration of Quarter 1 (about 8-10 weeks).

8. What are the possible benefits to you and/or to others form your participation in this research study?
The participants in this study will participate in classroom activities that will help them develop their writing skills. The researcher will benefit from the information and insights gathered during this study because it will help improve the researcher's teaching practice. The researcher will also benefit because the completion of the study will allow the researcher to publish a paper and attain a Master of Arts in Teaching degree. Hopefully, the information that is learned from this study will help other teachers improve their practice.

9. If you choose to participate in this study, will it cost you anything?

No.

10.Will you receive any compensation for participating in this study?

No.

11.What if you decide that you do not want to take part in this study? What other options are available to you if you decide not to participate or to withdraw?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate in the study, and your refusal will not influence your current or future relationships with Hamline University or with Shakopee Public Schools. In addition, if significant new findings develop during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to continue participation, we will provide that information to you.

12.How can you withdraw from this research study, and who should you contact if you have any questions or concerns?

You are free to withdraw your consent and stop participation in this research study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits for which you may be entitled. If you wish to stop your participation in this research study for any reason, you should tell me, or contact me at <u>agranai01@hamline.edu</u>, or Dr. Joe Lewis at <u>jlewis06@hamline.edu</u>. You should also call or email Professor Lewis for any questions, concerns, suggestions, or complaints about the research and your experience as a participant in the study. In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at Hamline University at <u>IRB@hamline.edu</u>.

13.Are there any anticipated circumstances under which your participation may be terminated by the researcher(s) without your or your parent/guardian's consent?

No.

14.Will the researchers benefit from your participation in this study?

The researchers will gain no benefit from your participation in this study beyond the publication and/or presentation of the results obtained from the study, and the invaluable research experience and hands-on learning that the students will gain as a part of their educational experience.]

15.Where will this research be made available once the study is completed?

The research is public scholarship and the abstract and final product will be catalogued in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, a searchable electronic repository. It may also be published or used in other ways, such as in conference presentations or published in research journals.

16.Has this research study received approval from Shakopee High School where the research will be conducted?

Yes.

PARTICIPANT COPY

Signatures:

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Signature and printed name of person obtaining consent Date
(Student researcher or PI)

_____
Title of person obtaining consent

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this Form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

_____
Printed Name of Parent/Guardian of Participant Date

_____
Signature of Parent/Guardian of Participant

_____
Signature of Principal Investigator or Faculty Advisor Date

INVESTIGATOR COPY
(Duplicate signature page for researcher's records)

Signatures:

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Signature and printed name of person obtaining consent Date
(Student researcher or PI)

_____
Title of person obtaining consent

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this Form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

_____
Printed Name of Parent/Guardian of Participant Date

_____
Signature of Parent/Guardian of Participant

_____
Signature of Principal Investigator or Faculty Advisor Date

Appendix F

Student Consent Form

<u>Consent to Participate in Study</u>

Study Title: The Effects of Written Feedback and Conferences on Student Writing Scores in Ninth Grade English Classrooms

My name is Anthony Granai. In addition to being your English 9 teacher, I am a graduate student at Hamline University.

I am asking you to take part in a research study because I am trying to learn more about how best to provide feedback on student writing. I want to learn how well different types of feedback help students develop their writing skills. Your parent(s)/guardian(s) have given you permission to participate in this study.

If you agree, you will be asked to fill out two surveys (online). You will be asked about which type of feedback on your writing helps you improve your writing skills the most and which type you personally prefer to receive. The surveys should both take about five minutes to complete. Your scores on two summative writing assessments will also be part of the study. These summative assessments are the same ones that all students will be completing.

You do not have to be in this study. No one will be mad at you if you decide not to do this study. Even if you start the study, you can stop later if you want to. You may ask questions about the study at any time.

If you decide to be in the study, I will not share your responses to survey questions with anyone else. Even if your parents or other teachers ask, I will not tell them about how you responded to the survey questions. Your name will not be included in the study. Although I will know what your individual writing scores are, your identity will not be linked to them in the study and will not be shared with anyone.

Signing here means that you have read this form or have had it read to you and that you are willing to be in this study.

_____

Signature of subject

Subject's printed name

Signature of investigator

Date