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Practice of Written Feedback in Nursing Degree Programmes in Karachi: The Students' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify students' perceptions about the practices of provision and utilization of written feedback in the nursing degree programmes in Karachi.

Study Design: Cross-sectional descriptive study.

Place and Duration of Study: Nine Nursing Institutions in Karachi, Pakistan were selected for the study, from February to October 2011.

Methodology: The sample consisted of 379 second year nursing students from nine institutions in Karachi. The data was collected through a modified Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ) developed by Gibbs and Simpson. The data obtained through AEQ was analyzed in the SPSS.

Results: Students reported wide variations in the practices related to written assignments, and the provision of written feedback. Although 80% of the students, reported receiving written feedback with or without oral feedback, 20% of them, received only verbal feedback on their assignments. For 44 - 46% of the students, the quality, quantity, timing, and utilization of feedback was below the reference scores, which is indicative of negative perceptions. Only 40% reported receiving feedback on regular basis. Assignment guidelines were not always provided in a written form. In most cases, the guidelines were ambiguous as well as the feedback was not always reflective of the guidelines.

Conclusion: The findings have implications for teachers, students, and institutions similar to the context of this study. Teachers need to be aware of the role and the impact of written feedback on students' learning and develop competence for giving effective feedback. Finally, institutional commitment and policies are needed to promote the practices of written feedback.

Key Words: *Written feedback. Assessment. Student perceptions. Nursing education. Assessment experience questionnaire (AEQ).*

INTRODUCTION

Written feedback plays an important role in students' assessment and learning.¹ It helps to identify the gap between the students' actual and the desired performance as well as it provides justification for a given grade. Moreover, it helps in promoting the learners' meta-cognition through reflection.^{1,2} Likewise, written feedback assist students in developing their academic writing skills¹ which is a pressing issue of professional education worldwide, but especially among countries where English is not the first language for instances, Pakistan.³ However, the effectiveness of feedback is highly dependent on how the feedback is given and received by the students. Written feedback is considered effective, if it is precise, clear, timely, and balanced - provides critique, contains the element of praise and offer suggestions.^{1,2,4,5} Moreover, when it contains sufficient details for the students' under-

standing.⁶ Ineffective feedback may do more harm than good because it has negative impact on the student motivation and learning.⁷

Despite the pivotal role of written feedback in students' learning, empirical evidence from other countries suggest several gaps in the process of written feedback.^{7,8} Studies from the students' perspective explain several reasons that may prevent students from utilizing the feedback. These reasons include the way feedback is given, the timing and quality of feedback, students' inability to fully interpret and understand the comments. However, no published data was found on the phenomenon of written feedback in Pakistan except one study indicating that the type of feedback by tutors on the written online assignments impacted on students' performance.⁹

This paper reports the students' perceptions about the practices of written feedback on written assignments and its utilization in the nine nursing schools where this study was conducted.

METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional descriptive study design was used in this study. Descriptive design is considered appropriate for a topic that is new or has been studied in a new setting or population.¹⁰ A two tier sampling process was

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used to select the sample. First, eleven nursing institutions in Karachi that were recognized by Pakistan Nursing Council, were offering a degree programme in nursing, and were willing to provide access to their students were included in the study. Of that, two nursing institutions were excluded, because they did not have the practice of returning written assignments to their students. Second, of the selected institutions only second year students, who were willing to participate in the study, were selected. This was to ensure that students would have possibly undergone the experience of receiving written feedback from their teachers. Based on these criteria, out of 403, 379 students completed the questionnaire.

A structured self-administered survey questionnaire that consisted of three sections was used to obtain the required data. The first and the second section were developed by the researchers; whereas the third section was adopted from the Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ) with the permission from the author.¹¹ The first section of the survey consisted of demographic information of the participants, while the second section identified the current practices of written feedback according to the Pakistani context. The third section aimed to obtain information about the amount and timings; quality; and utilization of written feedback. The reported Cronbach's alpha for these items in the third section were between 0.74 - 0.87.¹¹ The face validity of the questionnaire was re-established for its use in the Pakistani context through experts in nursing and teacher education. The questionnaire was then pilot tested and minor modifications were made from linguistic purpose.

After permission of the institutional Ethical Review Committee, the data were collected between April and May 2011. An informed consent was sought from each student for participation.

All the data was entered and analyzed in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19. Descriptive statistics-percentages and frequencies were used to analyze the data for section one and two, whereas Gibbs and Simpson method of analysis was used for section three of the questionnaire.¹¹ Accordingly, the scores of all items in each of the sub-section were added and then the mean scores for each sub-section were computed for individual students. A reference score was identified by calculating the mean from the mean scores of individual students. The calculated reference score was used to see the number of students above or below that reference score.

RESULTS

As shown in Table I, the majority of students were female, between the age of 21 - 25 years, and had intermediate as their basic education. With regard to the

medium of instruction during their high school, nearly half of the students $n = 178$ (47%) had received instructions in local language or through a mixed medium. However, in their nursing schools, most of the students were expected to write their assignments in English.

Most of the students 96% ($n = 364$) reported that they had received guidelines for completing their written assignments. Of those, 56.2% ($n = 213$) had both verbal and written; whereas 25% ($n = 95$) received only verbal and 11.6 % ($n = 44$) received only written guidelines. With regard to the question whether feedback provided by the faculty was reflective of the guidelines, nearly 84% ($n = 319$) responded in affirmation. Eighty percent of the students acknowledged receiving written feedback with or without verbal feedback; however, nearly 20% ($n = 75$) of them received only verbal feedback on their assignments. Of the 80% ($n = 304$) students who were receiving written feedback, with or without verbal feedback, only 44.1% ($n = 134$) reported to have the written feedback regularly while the rest of them 55.9% ($n = 170$) received the feedback sometimes or occasionally.

As shown in Table II, the majority of the students reported receiving feedback on the content while nearly half of them had feedback on language, format and references. Ratings of the students' perceptions about the quantity, timings, quality, and utilization of the feedback are summarized in Table III. Their mean score for quantity and timings of the feedback was 2.9 ± 0.61 , while; ($n = 165$) 54.3% of the students were above and 45.7% ($n = 139$) were below the mean score. For the quality of feedback their mean score was 3.26; nearly 54% ($n = 163$) of the students were above the mean while 46% ($n = 139$) were below the mean. For utilization of the feedback, mean score of all students was 3.75; while 55.8% ($n = 169$) of the students were above mean and 44.2% ($n = 134$) were below the mean score ± 0.51 .

Many students identified more than one reason that they perceived to be an obstacle in the utilization of the written feedback. Around 40% ($n = 152$) of the students thought delayed feedback, low grades received in the assignments, and limited opportunity to clarify the feedback were common obstacles, whereas, 30% ($n = 114$) of them indicated that disagreement with faculty feedback, and negatively written comments were the main hindrances for using the feedback. Overall, their satisfaction on practices of written feedback was nearly 59.6 %, ($n = 226$) but the rest were dissatisfied.

In terms of the students' efforts in the utilization of the feedback; the majority of students (73%) ($n = 277$) acknowledged that they would go back to faculty for the clarification of the feedback, 68% ($n = 258$) stated to rely on their peers to understand the teachers' feedback.

Table I: Demographic profile of the study participants.

Variables	n=379 (%)
Age	
< 20 years	89 (23.5)
21-25 years	190 (50.1)
26-30 years	71 (18.7)
Above 30	29 (7.7)
Educational background	
Matriculation	04 (1.1)
A level	01 (0.3)
Intermediate	289 (76.2)
Bachelors	77 (20.3)
Masters other than nursing	08 (2.1)
Expected languages for assignments in nursing	
English	315 (83.1)
Both (Urdu and English)	64 (16.9)
Languages spoken at home	
Urdu	156 (41.2)
Pushto	89 (23.5)
Sindhi	46 (12.1)
Punjabi	38 (10.0)
Others	50 (13.2)
Medium of instructions in high school	
English	200 (52.8)
Mixed	134 (35.4)
Urdu	35 (9.2)
Other	07 (1.8)
Did not respond	03 (0.8)

Table II: Focus of the feedback (n=379) .

Aspects of feedback	Yes (%)*	No (%)*
Content	255 (67.3)	124 (32.7)
Language	195 (51.5)	184 (48.5)
References style / format	195 (51.5)	184 (48.5)
Organization of thoughts	177 (46.7)	202 (53.3)
All areas	112 (29.6)	267 (70.4)

* The percentages do not equal to 100% as more than one response were provided by the participants.

Table III: Students' perceptions about quantity, timings, quality and utilization of the written feedback *n=304.

Variables	Minimum scores	Maximum scores	Mean score	Students' score above the mean n (%)	Students' score below the mean n (%)
Quantity and timing of written feedback	1.16	4.33	2.90	165 (54.3)	139 (45.7)
Quality of written feedback**	1.33	4.83	3.26	163 (54.0)	139 (46.0)
Utilization of the written feedback***	1.83	5.00	3.75	169 (55.7)	134 (44.3)

total=302 (two students did not respond); *total n=303 (one student did not respond);

*80% students who received written feedback.

DISCUSSION

Findings of this study indicate great variations in the practices of written feedback among the nursing degree programmes in Karachi. The researcher found that none of the schools had any written policies for provision of

written feedback to students while in some schools students' assignments were not returned. One reason for not returning the assignment was to retain papers for audit purpose. Of those institutions that claimed to have the practice of returning assignments, 19.8% of the students denied this practice. This response could be due to variations in the practices of teachers within an institution.

Although 80% (n = 304) of the students received feedback with or without verbal feedback, only 44% of them received feedback on regular basis. The ranges of the mean scores of individual students on the quality, quantity and utilization of the feedback (shown in Table III) were much wider in students' scores in UK study, which used the same tool as in the current study suggesting that the teachers practices of feedback reported in this study were less homogeneous,¹⁰ which means feedback was incomprehensive, was too late to be useful, and had little impact on students' subsequent learning.¹ Comparing the standard of education between UK and Pakistan, the findings of this study results are not surprising as the standard of nursing education is generally lower in developing countries as compared to developed countries.

The reported obstacles in utilizing the feedback are aligned with the previous studies.^{4,8,9,12-14} These obstacles are considered to be demotivating to the students' self-efficacy and in utilizing the feedback in their subsequent assignments.

The finding that 25% of the students received only verbal guidelines for written assignments is contrary to the suggestion that teachers must provide clear guidelines to their students on how the assignment will be assessed.^{5,15,16} Having only verbal guidelines are indicative of poor practices, because it is subject to the students' listening and interpretation.

Unlike the findings of other researchers,^{17,18} students in this study reported receiving more feedback on the content than grammar and organization of thoughts. This difference could be due to that the nurse teachers give more value to the content than the mechanics of language or because they lack command in English language. However, considering the fact that English is the second or third language for majority of the students, feedback on language and organization of thoughts would help the students to improve their writing skills.

The majority of students in this study sought clarification from their teachers (73%) or peers on the received feedback, which implies their motivation for using the feedback and to further their learning. Empirical evidence suggests that student-faculty interactions have significant impact on students' academic achievements.^{19,20}

The above findings have implications for teachers, students and institutions similar to the context of this

study. Teachers need to be aware of the role and impact of written feedback on students' learning and develop competence for giving effective feedback. Moreover, a shared understanding of the teachers and students about the goal, concepts and the language is necessary for better utilization of the feedback. Finally, institutional commitment and policies are needed to promote the practices of effective written feedback.

Although the study employed a universal sample of 379 participants, it was limited to nursing students. Moreover, data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire inquiring students' perceptions of the practices that relied on the recall of their experience. Future studies are recommended in other disciplines and triangulation of students' perception with evaluation of students' marked papers consisting teachers' feedback.

CONCLUSION

This study identified the students' perceptions of written feedback on written assignments and its utilization in nursing schools. The findings indicate several areas of improvement to actualize the desired role of feedback for students' learning. In this view, this situation calls for due attention to the topic of written feedback in all institutions of higher education in Pakistan.

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