

# Attitudes of Saudi EFL Female Students Towards Current Teacher Feedback Practices

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## Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the attitudes of female Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) learners towards the current practices and the challenges of teacher feedback. Utilizing a quantitative approach, 87 female Saudi EFL students completed a questionnaire about their experience with teacher feedback and the problems they encountered with this during the semester. The study aimed to explore two main aspects, including the students' attitudes towards the current practices of teacher feedback and the challenges encountered, and the students' suggestions for improving teacher feedback practices. The study outcomes revealed that the students receive direct and positive feedback. Additionally, the students perceived the teachers' feedback to be useful and of good quality. The findings also indicated that students expect and prefer detailed feedback on their written tasks. However, the participants reported some concerns regarding the punctuality of teacher feedback and provided suggestions to improve such practices. The study also presents the limitations and recommendations for future research.

**Keywords:** attitudes, female students, Saudi students, teacher feedback, writing skills

## 1. Introduction

Writing is considered one of the most difficult skills and challenges facing second language (L2) students (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Learning how to write successfully in a foreign language context, where the L2 is not practiced regularly, is more complicated than in a second language setting (Ortega, 2009), and this means that careful attention should be given to teaching practices in order to maximize the language learning opportunities (Aldossary, 2017). Teacher feedback represents one common way to respond to mistakes made by students and, thus, enhance their writing abilities (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The concept of feedback has been defined in different ways in the literature. Mao and Crosthwaite (2020) defined corrective feedback as written responses given by the teacher for students' written tasks, with the aim of improving subsequent work. Indeed, corrective feedback is often used by teachers as an instructional technique in L2 writing classes to help students enhance their writing performance. Providing corrective feedback to learners, either in the form of written commentary or teacher-learner discussions, has long been recognized as an important method for L2 writing teachers (Harmer, 2001). For example, Black and William (1998) stated that corrective feedback on learners' texts is one of the most effective tools for writing development. Additionally, Hyland and Hyland (2006) asserted that teacher written feedback plays a significant role in writing classes. To gain a higher level of writing, significant effort is expected from both students and teachers, and part of this effort is reflected by teacher feedback, which can greatly impact students' L2 writing. Therefore, the influence of teacher feedback is regarded as a significant topic in relation to studying L2 writing (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). In order to maximize the benefits of teacher feedback in EFL writing classes, it is important to understand students' attitudes towards teacher feedback, as this represents a key factor in determining the success of classroom activities. For example, if students have negative beliefs or attitudes towards teacher feedback, they are unlikely to accept it.

## 2. Literature Review

The effective emphasis of error correction by teacher feedback is considered significant (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), as it helps to clarify and build on students' ideas (Cullen, 2002). In classrooms, the teachers' role in guiding and controlling the learning situation is vital for an effective learning experience, as students cannot be expected to perform well on their own (Al-Sawalha, 2016). Previously, some studies have been conducted to

assess the effectiveness of teacher feedback. Indeed, these studies generally relate to three main categories: studies investigating the effectiveness of teacher feedback (e.g., Biber, Nekrasova, & Horn, 2011; Ellis et al., 2008; Hubais & Dumaning, 2014; Rastgou, 2016; Wei & Cao, 2020), studies investigating the efficacy of different types of teacher feedback (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Chandler, 2003; Hosseiny, 2014; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010), and studies exploring students' perceptions and attitudes towards teacher feedback (e.g., Al-Sawalha, 2016; Chen et al., 2016; Hamouda, 2011; Qutob & Madini, 2020; Zacharias, 2007). These studies generally reported that teacher feedback is useful and that students' value and use teachers' feedback.

A meta-analysis conducted by Biber et al. (2011) reported that feedback focusing on form and content may be the most beneficial tool for writing development. Specifically, the researchers found that providing corrective feedback on form and content resulted in greater improvement compared to feedback focusing on only one aspect (i.e., form or content). The study also identified greater improvements in grammatical accuracy when learners received feedback on both aspects compared to on only one aspect. Furthermore, an experimental study conducted by Hubais and Dumaning (2014), involving 17 Omani EFL students who received feedback on form and content, showed that the learners had greater improvement in form than in content but generally improved their writing in both aspects. Based on this, the researchers concluded that, although both forms of feedback resulted in writing development, feedback focusing on form is likely to better facilitate improvements. In a comprehensive longitudinal study, Rastgou (2016) investigated the influence of sustained written feedback on the writing development of 92 EFL learners. In this study, the participants were divided into four groups; group 1 received written corrective feedback, group 2 received feedback on content and organization, group 3 received corrective feedback and feedback on content and organization, and group 4 received no feedback. The findings showed that the participants who received feedback significantly improved and retained their improvements only in the dimensions they had received feedback on. In addition, those who did not receive feedback showed no improvement. The results also indicated that the students had positive attitudes towards teacher feedback, perceiving it as a useful activity. Overall, the authors concluded that development in particular aspects of writing was associated with sustained engagement in writing and guided feedback. Taken together, these studies suggest that teacher feedback can enhance the writing skills of learners. Notably, although one key aim of teacher feedback is to improve students' writing, the type of feedback is an influential element of teacher feedback practices.

There is a growing literature base focusing on the efficacy of two main types of teacher feedback, including direct and indirect feedback, and the extent to which this feedback enhances writing performance. Direct, or explicit, feedback refers to instances when the teacher identifies an error and explicitly provides the correct form on the paper (e.g., correct word choice, phrase, spelling, and construction). Conversely, indirect, or implicit, feedback refers to when the teacher highlights an error in a certain way, such as by circling, underlining, or coding, without providing the correction, thus allowing the learner to identify the error and find an appropriate solution (Ferris, 2006). Research in the literature is inconsistent regarding which of these two types is more effective. For instance, Chandler (2003) argued that there is no significant difference between direct feedback and indirect feedback for improving accuracy, whereas Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) asserted that indirect teacher feedback is more effective than direct feedback, as learners engage more with indirect feedback. Despite this, the choice of one type rather than the other is based on one main factor, which is the learners' proficiency levels. Indeed, Kim (2009) suggested that the type of feedback greatly relies on the recipients' proficiency. In particular, learners with low proficiency levels may benefit more from direct feedback, whereas learners with higher proficiency may find indirect feedback more beneficial. This is because learners at lower L2 levels may lack the linguistic competence to self-correct language problems, even if they are highlighted for them (Brown, 2000). Therefore, when providing feedback on written tasks, it could be recommended to consider the error type, learners' proficiency level, and, most importantly, learners' preferences and beliefs. According to Storch (2013), language learning beliefs play an important role in how the individual judges an activity. Moreover, early research (e.g., Green, 1993) suggested that preconceived beliefs influence learners' judgment of both the effectiveness and enjoyment of classroom activities. Hyland (2003) found that the percentage of teacher feedback that learners incorporated into their revised drafts varied according to their personal beliefs and preferences towards teachers' feedback. Accordingly, learners' attitude towards teacher feedback is a crucial factor that can impact their engagement with feedback, and teachers should carefully consider this when commenting on students' work (Piper, 1989).

A recent study by Kileri and Listyani (2021) explored the perceptions of academic writing students ( $N = 6$ ) regarding teacher feedback. The findings indicated that most students had positive attitudes towards teacher feedback as it contributed to their writing development, but the participants also suggested that teacher feedback

should be more detailed in the future. Zacharias's (2007) mixed-method study explored the attitudes of both teachers ( $N = 20$ ) and students ( $N = 100$ ) towards teacher feedback. The findings showed that teachers and students had strong preferences for teacher feedback, but the students generally preferred feedback on form and considered this type of feedback as the most important factor in writing development. Other studies have shown that feedback on all different aspects of writing is also viewed positively. A study by Chen et al. (2016) investigating EFL students' perceptions of teacher written feedback reported that the students had positive attitudes towards teacher feedback and strongly preferred extended comments on both the content and grammar of their written work. However, despite students' perceptions of the usefulness of teacher feedback reported in previous studies, teacher feedback may sometimes be discouraging for certain reasons. In a qualitative study, Al-Sawalha (2016) investigated the perceptions of 23 EFL students at a university in Jordan regarding their teachers' written feedback. In this study, the findings showed that the students believed that teacher feedback is useful for their writing improvement. However, some students expressed that teacher feedback was sometimes too detailed, unclear, and discouraging, which led to the students experiencing feelings of disappointment.

Students' attitudes towards teacher feedback have also been investigated in Saudi Arabia, which represents a rapidly growing and evolving EFL context, and studies have reported positive results. For instance, a study by Hamouda (2011) investigated the preferences and attitudes of 200 male, Saudi EFL students and 20 writing teachers towards teacher feedback. Specifically, the study aimed to understand the difficulties encountered by students and teachers during the feedback process. The results showed that both teachers and students had positive attitudes towards teacher feedback and that learners preferred teacher feedback to both peer- and self-feedback. However, despite students preferring teacher feedback, they may still have some concerns. In a quasi-experimental study, Alshahrani and Storch (2014) investigated teacher feedback practices and learners' preferences for such feedback. The students ( $N = 45$ ) were all male, Saudi undergraduates participating in EFL writing classes. The study showed that most of the learners valued direct and comprehensive teacher feedback as it can help them improve their writing in the future. In terms of the focus of feedback, approximately half of the students (51%) preferred teacher feedback on grammar, approximately one-third of the students preferred feedback on expressions, and very few students expressed a preference for feedback on mechanics. Moreover, a longitudinal study conducted by Alharbi (2016) explored the perceptions of teacher feedback of 50 male, Saudi, EFL students, and found that the students had a positive attitude towards teacher written feedback and that they perceived the teacher comments to be useful for their overall writing development. A recent mixed-method study by Qutob and Madini (2020) explored the preferences for teacher feedback on written tasks of 114 female Saudi EFL learners, who were aged 12 to 13 years and were studying in the seventh grade at a private intermediate school. The findings of this study showed that students preferred receiving constructive and detailed feedback on their written tasks.

In summary, previous research has shown that teacher written feedback can lead to improvements in the writing of L2 learners and that the students' attitudes towards teacher feedback are notably positive. However, the studies conducted in Saudi Arabia predominantly focused on male students only (e.g., Alharbi, 2016; Hamouda, 2011; Alshahrani & Storch, 2014), or were conducted with female students but in intermediate schools (e.g., Qutob & Madini, 2020). To the best knowledge of the researcher, no studies have been conducted to investigate the attitudes of tertiary-level female students towards the current practices of teacher feedback, as well as the challenges and problems they encounter when receiving teacher feedback. Therefore, the present study attempts to address this issue that has received little attention in Saudi Arabia by determining how teachers provide feedback on the written tasks of female EFL university students and exploring their attitudes towards such practices. This study also aims to elicit students' suggestions for improving teacher feedback. Overall, this present work attempts to address the following two research questions:

- 1) What are the attitudes of female students towards the current practices of teacher feedback?
- 2) What are the challenges encountered and the students' suggestions for improving current teacher feedback practices?

### **3. Methodology and Procedures**

#### *3.1 Participants*

The sample of the current study comprised 87 female Saudi EFL undergraduate students majoring in English at a public university in Saudi Arabia. The sample consisted of the entire cohort of level two students (Writing II), with 29 students in each of the three classes, which were taught by three different instructors. The age of the sample ranged between 19 and 21 years. The students had passed level one (Writing I) before enrolling in Writing II. The instructors for the three different groups had between five and seven years of experience in

teaching EFL writing.

### 3.2 Student Questionnaire

The attitude questionnaire, which was developed based on relevant literature, consisted of 18 items regarding the students' attitudes towards teacher feedback. In particular, it aimed to explore the students' attitudes towards the current practices of teacher feedback, the challenges encountered, and their suggestions for improving the current feedback practices. The participants responded to the items using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *agree*, 3 = *neutral*, 2 = *disagree*, and 1 = *strongly disagree*). The means of the responses were classified as follows: "strongly disagree" from 1.00 and 1.80, "disagree" from 1.81 to 2.60, "neutral" from 2.61 to 3.40, "agree" from 3.41 to 4.20, and "strongly agree" from 4.21 to 5.00. To assess the validity of the questionnaire, five assistant professors of applied linguistics were invited to gain their insights on its clarity and accuracy, and the questionnaire was further amended based on their suggestions. To establish the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with 14 female students with the same proficiency levels. Cronbach's alpha was 0.86, thus indicating high internal consistency of the questionnaire items.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The present study was conducted with female students from the English Department of a well-established public university in Saudi Arabia. Throughout semester I in 2019, all participants wrote between six and seven different paragraphs in English, which were derived from the textbook, and received teacher feedback. Due to the education policy in Saudi Arabia, it was not possible for the researcher to physically approach the female participants in class. Therefore, an electronic questionnaire was created using surveymonkey.com, and the participants completed it online. At the end of week 13 of the semester, the researcher arranged an online meeting with the participants via Zoom, provided a detailed explanation of the nature of the study, and responded to the students' questions. The participants were then given a link to access and complete the online questionnaire, and the researcher was present online to ensure all items were understood appropriately. The researcher informed the participants that the questionnaire should be completed based on their experiences of teacher feedback received in the current semester. These procedures were conducted during a 3-hour session. To analyze the students' questionnaire, the data were manually entered and assessed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to obtain the means and standard deviations.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The present study aimed to elicit the attitudes of female Saudi EFL undergraduate students towards the current practices of teacher feedback, as well as to explore the challenges encountered and the students' suggestions for improving current teacher feedback practices. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the students' responses to each item of the attitude questionnaire.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of responses to items of the attitude questionnaire

Item No.	Rank	Item	Mean	SD
1	1	The teacher's feedback is direct (e.g., the teacher explains mistakes and provides correction).	4.58	0.73
6	2	The teacher feedback improves my grammar and vocabulary.	4.48	0.52
2	3	The teachers' feedback is positive (e.g., praising and motivating).	4.47	0.68
7	4	The teacher feedback helps me improve on content and organization.	4.29	0.76
8	5	The teacher feedback helps me improve on mechanics (e.g., spelling and punctuations).	4.25	0.58
16	6	I would like the teacher to provide feedback during the entire writing process (i.e., during pre-writing, writing, revising, and editing).	4.19	0.72
18	7	I would like the teacher to focus his comments on all writing aspects (grammar, structure, meaning, spelling, punctuations, etc.).	4.18	0.94
15	8	It is not difficult to understand my teacher's feedback.	4.1	0.91
10	9	Teacher feedback helps me develop my critical thinking skills.	4	1.11
5	10	The teacher feedback is detailed, concise and precise.	3.9	1.03
11	11	The teacher feedback enhances my self-confidence as a writer.	3.89	1.25
13	12	I get higher scores in subsequent writing tests after receiving the teacher's feedback.	3.79	0.88
12	13	My overall writing improves after receiving the teacher's feedback.	3.73	1.13
9	14	Teacher feedback helps me identify and correct my own errors.	3.65	1.07
17	15	I would like the teacher to give direct feedback with positive comments.	3.64	1.40
14	16	The teacher takes a long time to give me feedback on my writing.	3.43	1.17
4	17	The teachers' feedback included some discouraging comments.	2.5	1.29
3	18	Teachers' feedback should not be too detailed.	2.45	1.38

As shown in Table 1 above, the mean scores ranged from 2.45 to 4.58, with standard deviations ranging from 0.52 to 1.40. Table 1 shows that items 1, 6, 2, 7, and 8 had mean scores that ranged between 4.25 and 4.58, thus falling within the “strongly agree” category, and these items represented 28% of the total number of items. Moreover, items 16, 18, 15, 10, 5, 11, 13, 12, 9, 17, and 14 had mean scores ranging between 3.43 and 4.19. All the scores for these items fell within the “agree” category and the items represented 61% of the total number of items. Furthermore, items 4 and 3 had mean scores that ranged from 2.45 to 2.50 (Table 1). The scores for these items fell within the “disagree” category and the items represented 11% of the total number of items.

The first research question in this study focused on the students’ attitudes towards the current practices of teacher feedback. In general, the participants expressed positive attitudes towards the current practices of teacher feedback. Indeed, the findings from the questionnaire indicated that the students received direct and positive feedback, and they also responded that the comments given on their written texts were clear and included both detailed explanations and corrections. These findings are in line with the results of previous studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2016; Kileri & Listyani, 2021), which also found that students valued detailed teacher feedback. The results of the current study also indicated that the female students felt that such detailed and positive teacher feedback enhanced the grammar, vocabulary, content, organization, and mechanics of their writing. Importantly, these findings confirm the results of previous studies (e.g., Rastgou, 2016), which reported that teacher feedback can positively contribute to students’ L2 writing development. Moreover, the impact of teacher feedback appears to have benefits that extend beyond the development of writing skills. For example, the results of this study demonstrated that teacher feedback was not only perceived as useful for writing abilities but that the students also felt that the feedback enhanced their self-confidence as writers, enabled them to develop critical thinking skills, which supported them to identify their own mistakes, and enhanced their performance in writing tests. Similar findings were also reported by Alharbi (2016) with Saudi male students, as his study found that teacher feedback enhanced students’ self-confidence and critical thinking skills. According to Cle’ment, Dornyei, and Noels (1994), the development of problem-solving abilities in students may help them to enhance their self-confidence and, thus, may positively influence both their attitudes towards the learning experience and their achievements.

The second research question aimed to explore the students’ attitudes towards the challenges encountered when receiving teacher feedback, and their suggestions for improving teacher feedback practices. The findings from the questionnaire revealed only one main concern raised by the participants, which was that feedback from the teachers was not always timely. Although the timeliness of teacher feedback is an important factor that can affect the students’ learning experience (Ha, Nguyen, & Hung, 2021), this did not negatively affect the students’ experiences in the present study. Indeed, in this study, the participants generally expressed positive attitudes towards their experience with teacher feedback. However, delays in teacher feedback, particularly in EFL contexts, are a frequently reported challenge for teacher feedback and are commonly attributed to various factors such as the number of mistakes, time constraints, and the class size (Wakayabashi, 2008). In the current study, the number of students in each class was 29, which may mean that the teachers were required to spend relatively longer on providing feedback. Therefore, such delays may be worthwhile, as teachers perhaps required extra time to carefully consider the mistakes and provide detailed feedback and corrections. This detailed feedback was, in turn, clearly satisfying for the students, and this was reflected in the students’ strong preference for receiving detailed feedback in the future. Notably, these findings contrast with those reported by Al-Sawalha (2016), which suggested that students did not like detailed feedback and that they felt disappointed when receiving detailed comments on their writing.

Moreover, the findings of this study highlighted several suggestions of the participants for maximizing the benefits of teacher feedback. For example, the participants indicated that teacher feedback should be positive and detailed, and should be provided during the entire writing process, including planning, writing, revising, and editing. This suggestion may reflect the positive attitude of students towards teacher feedback, as well as their confidence in the efficacy and importance of teacher intervention. Additionally, the findings indicated that students preferred teacher feedback focusing on all aspects of writing, such as grammar, structure, meaning, spelling, and punctuation. Indeed, similar findings have been reported by several previous studies at the tertiary level (e.g., Alharbi, 2016; Alshahrani & Storch, 2014; Hamouda, 2011) and the intermediate school level (e.g., Qutob & Madini, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explored the attitudes of female Saudi EFL students regarding the current practices of teacher feedback, as well as the challenges encountered in this context and their suggestions for improving such practices. The findings revealed that the female students generally had positive attitudes towards teacher

feedback, highlighted some challenges of feedback, and provided suggestions for improving teacher feedback. Therefore, the findings provide teachers with insight into the positive role that teacher feedback plays in EFL writing classes. However, some students reported delays in receiving feedback, which highlights the need for teachers to endeavor to provide timely feedback in order to obtain a better learning experience. One way to achieve this goal could be to reduce the number of students in a class so that teachers can provide more immediate feedback to students, which represents an action normally carried out by education policymakers. Although the findings of this study may be important for informing the teaching of L2 writing, it has some limitations. Firstly, the present study was conducted in one Saudi university, thus making it difficult to generalize the findings to other universities due to the varying feedback policies in their writing classes. Secondly, the participants in this study were all intermediate-level females. It may be useful for future studies to assess different genders at various proficiency levels. In addition, this study explored the students' attitudes towards teacher feedback, but future research may consider implementing pre-test and post-test designs to directly examine the influence of teacher feedback on students' writing abilities. It may also be worthwhile for future research to explore the association between the teachers' practices and the students' experience.

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