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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TEACHER FEEDBACK ON WRITING: TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

LA EFECTIVIDAD DE LA RETROALIMENTACIÓN DOCENTE EN LA ESCRITURA:
PERCEPCIONES DE ESTUDIANTES DE PROFESORADO DE INGLÉS
COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA

ESTUDIOS

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Abstract

The present investigation examines university students' views and preferences regarding teachers' different feedback practices on writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). There is scarce literature that deals specifically with higher education students enrolled in a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program. Thus, this study addresses the topic by examining Argentine college students' views on the different teacher feedback (TF) practices they are exposed to in their EFL academic writing classes. A group of students in the TEFL program at a public university in Argentina responded to a questionnaire that reflected the different written feedback practices teachers typically use to assess students' writing skills. The objective was two-fold: (i) to find out students' views regarding TF and explore how useful they find it to improve their writing skills, and (ii) to observe whether these views change as students become more experienced in writing and in receiving TF. Results show that both novice and more experienced student-writers value TF, particularly indirect and expressed as comments or suggestions for improvement,

as well as direct feedback. Results also indicate that perceptions vary as students gain more expertise in writing and in interpreting TF.

Keywords: Student perceptions, feedback, English as a foreign language, writing.

Resumen

La presente investigación examina las opiniones y preferencias de estudiantes sobre la devolución docente (DD) en la escritura en inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE). La bibliografía específicamente sobre las percepciones de estudiantes universitarios de profesorado de inglés es escasa. Es por ello que este estudio aborda el tema examinando las opiniones de estudiantes universitarios argentinos sobre las prácticas de DD a las cuales son expuestos en las asignaturas que enseñan la escritura académica en ILE. Un grupo de estudiantes de la carrera de Profesorado de Inglés de una universidad pública argentina respondió un cuestionario que reflejaba las diferentes prácticas de devolución que sus docentes típicamente utilizan para evaluar sus habilidades de escritura. El estudio tuvo dos objetivos: (i) conocer las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre la DD que reciben y explorar qué tan útil la consideran para mejorar su escritura. (ii) Observar si estas perspectivas cambian a medida que adquieren más experiencia en escribir y en recibir DD. Los resultados muestran que tanto los estudiantes-escritores inexpertos como los más experimentados valoran la DD, particularmente la indirecta expresada a través de comentarios y sugerencias para mejorar lo escrito, como también la DD directa. Los resultados también indican que las percepciones varían a medida que los estudiantes desarrollan más su experticia en la escritura y en la interpretación de la DD.

Palabras clave: Percepciones de estudiantes, devolución, inglés como lengua extranjera, escritura.

1. Introduction

The 21st century has experienced an ever-increasing interest worldwide for learning English for cultural, educational, economic, and touristic purposes among others. This interest has implied a great challenge for teachers and students in higher education as they are faced with the difficulties of teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL).

The development of writing skills in EFL and ESL is one of the areas that has presented the most challenges in the field of teaching and learning. Today, many students in higher education are expected not only to read, but also to write effectively in English. This entails that students should not only be prepared to write adequately for academic purposes, a skill they are not quite used to in the current day and age, but they should also do so in a language that is not their mother tongue. This has become a testing situation for EFL and ESL teachers, as they have to teach the features that pertain to written academic discourse in general in addition to those in English in particular.

This challenge has paved the way for the development of different lines of research related to the teaching and learning of writing in EFL/ESL. One of these is that of teacher feedback (TF) practices and their level of effectiveness to help students improve their writing skills. The 1990s were the heyday of investigations in this area. Researchers began to understand that feedback is a much more complex process than simply justifying the grade assigned to a student. Authors such as Carless (2006), and Burke and Pietrick (2010) have described feedback as an interactive social process between teachers and students in which different emotional aspects and power relationships between its participants are intertwined. While today linguists and teachers alike agree on this way of understanding feedback, they express some discrepancies regarding the degree of effectiveness of different TF practices.

Many studies have approached the subject of TF from different angles of analysis. Some have studied TF practices and their degree of effectiveness in helping students improve certain linguistic aspects. For instance, some authors have studied the effectiveness of TF regarding grammatical aspects of writing in EFL/ESL. An iconic debate in this regard is that between John Truscott and Dana Ferris. Truscott (1996) explains that correcting grammar errors in students' writings is pernicious and, thus, ineffective for the development of writing skills. He argues that grammar should not be corrected as the student will eventually and naturally learn it over time (2007, 1999, 1996). On the other hand, Ferris (2004, 1999) claims that if students do not receive corrective feedback on their grammar errors, they may feel disappointed, adding that if they are not proficient in grammar, they are, hence, not ready to self-edit their written work in terms of grammatical inaccuracies. While other studies have been conducted in this regard (Bruton, 2009; Bitchener, 2008), they have not yet reached a consensus as to which approach is the most effective to improve writing. Other studies (Ebadi, 2014; Ellis *et al.*, 2008; Sheen, 2007) have compared the effectiveness of "focused" and "unfocused" feedback. Focused feedback consists in correcting certain types of errors and ignoring others, while unfocused feedback

consists in pointing out all types of errors found in a text. These studies concluded that focused feedback is more effective than unfocused feedback.

Another line of research has analyzed whether feedback should be “direct” or “indirect” (López Casoli *et al.*, 2016; Machado *et al.*, 2015; Hosseiny, 2014; Silva Cruz, 2013; Ellis *et al.*, 2008; Frantzen, 1995). Direct feedback consists in the teacher identifying the presence of an error and providing the correct linguistic form, while indirect feedback only hints at the existence of an error or type of error without providing the target form. Research results vary depending on the context studied. López Casoli *et al.* (2016) studied TF given to advanced university EFL students and categorized it into direct and indirect. The results showed that although these students had received more indirect TF, they focused more on revising errors that had been indicated through direct feedback. Hosseiny (2014), on the other hand, found that both forms of feedback were useful for grammatical corrections in the context of pre-intermediate EFL students.

Further investigations analyzed the different types of comments written by teachers and their degree of effectiveness in helping students improve their writing (Tajik *et al.*, 2016; Sotoudehnama and Molavi, 2014; Iravani *et al.*, 2014; Rashtchi and Mirshahidi, 2011; Desrosiers, 2008; Sugita, 2006). Sotoudehnama and Molavi (2014) observed that TF expressed as statements (as opposed to questions or imperatives) was the most effective feedback type and the one students preferred the most as well.

In other cases, researchers focused on the medium through which students received feedback. Morra and Asís (2009) compared the effectiveness of written feedback on text versus taped feedback in audio format. They concluded that an eclectic approach seems to be effective since both taped and written feedback were useful for the students; the medium was not a factor that influenced students' writing improvements. Canavosio (2014) compared the impact of feedback that was submitted electronically versus feedback written on paper. Findings showed that providing feedback electronically was more effective as students became more actively involved in the revising process, which was evidenced in a lower frequency of omissions and elisions than in the paper-based written feedback.

Another line of research on TF that has attracted much attention is that of students' and teachers' perceptions on the feedback process. Some studies have shown discrepancies between how students and teachers perceive the effectiveness of certain TF practices (Martínez, 2014; Ferris, 2011; Carless, 2006; Daib, 2005; Hyland and Hyland, 2001). For example, one study shows that teachers prefer giving indirect

feedback (López Casoli and Berardo, 2016), particularly with more advanced students (Bitchener, 2012), while in others, students have claimed to prefer direct TF (Amrhein and Nassaji, 2010).

2. Objectives

Students' perceptions have been the focus of attention of several studies on TF (Ghazal *et al.*, 2014; Amrhein and Nassaji, 2010; Lizzio and Wilson, 2008; Montgomery and Baker, 2007). However, there are two research niches that paved the way for the present study. On the one hand, there is scant literature on the perceptions of students who are enrolled in a Teaching English as a Foreign Language program, that is to say, in a course of studies that is intended for students to become EFL/ESL teachers themselves. On the other hand, the literature about Argentinean higher educational contexts is even less abundant. Some studies on perceptions address the cultural aspects that may influence students' ways of perceiving TF (Fithriani, 2018; Evans and Waring, 2011), and consequently, the kind of feedback that may be more or less effective for students to improve their writing. Thus, the present investigation complements the literature on students' perceptions of TF from a Latin American perspective, specifically from Argentina.

This study departs from the hypothesis that college students value TF and that these perceptions change with experience both in writing and in receiving feedback. Hence, the study has a two-fold objective:

- To identify students' views regarding the teacher feedback received on their written productions.
- to observe whether these views on teacher feedback change as students become more experienced in writing and in receiving feedback.

3. Methodology

3.1. Context and Participants

The context of this research is a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program at a public university in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The participants in this study were 30 students enrolled in the program. Ten (10) students were in first year taking Process Writing 1, a four-month course which focuses on

the development of academic writing skills through writing cause and effect essays. Twenty (20) were fourth-year (senior) students taking Advanced Communication II, another four-month course whose goal is to develop advanced speaking and writing skills, with great emphasis on writing argumentative essays. Both courses are taught by a team of instructors who typically offered indirect comprehensive feedback in the form of marginal and in-text comments on the students' essays. Students also complete tasks that involve peer feedback, but this kind of feedback is not taken into account in the grading process. The courses are taught according to the principles of the process of writing described by Donald Murray (1997): prewriting, writing, and rewriting, and the expanded notion of the process of writing further developed by Flower and Hayes' Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (1981). Students in both courses write multiple drafts of a text, all of which receive TF.

3.2. Procedure

In order to find out the students' perceptions on teacher feedback (TF), the participants completed a questionnaire written in Spanish to ensure clarity of ideas and that the students' opinions could be expressed without foreign language interference. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. One section contained a set of questions that aimed at describing the demographics of the participants (age and gender). The second section asked questions related to the students' language background and academic trajectory in the program. These questions aimed to find out the participants' first language and their second or foreign language(s), which prerequisite writing courses in the program they had already taken but a final examination was pending and which prerequisite writing courses they had already taken and passed.

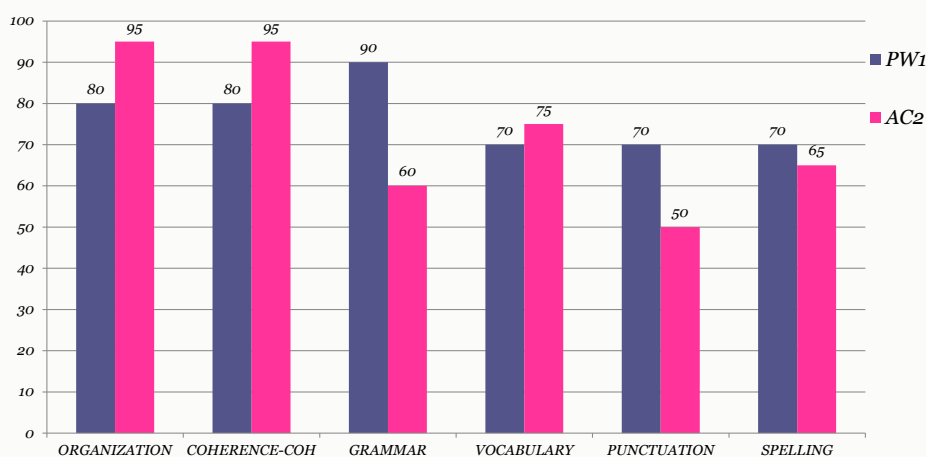
The third section contained questions pertaining to the students' perceptions and views on TF (see Appendix for a translated version of this section). This section of the questionnaire was, in turn, divided into three parts. Part A asked about the degree of usefulness students found in receiving TF on different aspects of a text (*i. e.*, the organization, cohesion, and coherence of the ideas in the text, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling). Part B asked the students about their preferences for the forms of correction employed by their teachers, whether they preferred direct or indirect feedback, imperative sentences, questions, comments marked with exclamation points, or no feedback at all. Part C asked students to read a set of statements regarding feedback and express their degree of agreement with them. These statements were based on affirmations often heard from students (*e. g.*, "I do not understand the feedback I receive from my instructors on my texts"). Others expressed ideas that teachers sometimes assume about the students (*e. g.*, "I do

not like my errors to be corrected” or “I prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback”). Still others expressed ideas that teachers typically hope that students will agree with (e. g., “The feedback I receive from my teachers helps me improve my writing in English”). The answers to this entire section were expressed through a five-point Likert scale and two open questions.

4. Results and discussion

The answers were quantified and the data was analyzed through descriptive statistics. Figure A shows the results obtained for the first survey question (“What aspects of your writing do you find more useful for your instructor to correct?”).

Figure A. Usefulness of teacher feedback on different writing aspects (percentages of “useful” and “very useful” scores).



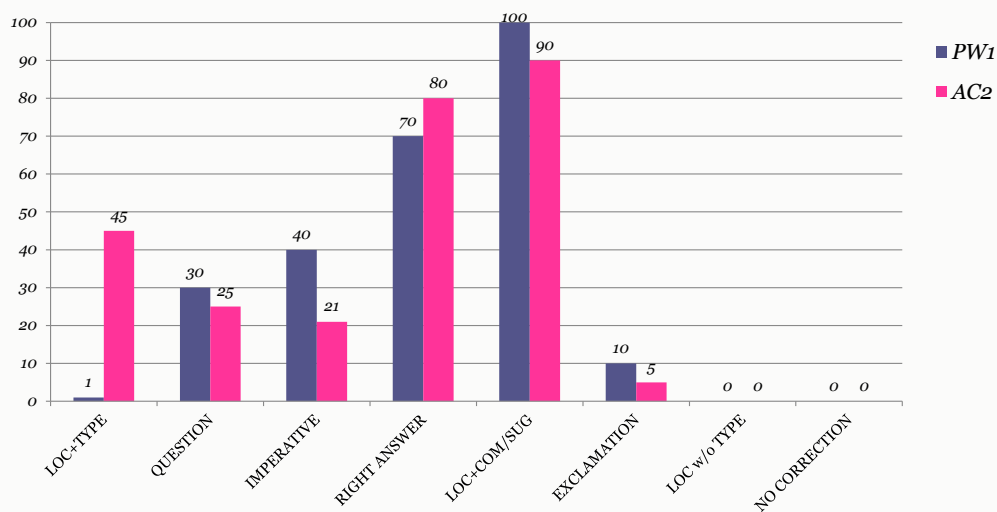
Source: Own elaboration.

The first-year students in the course Process Writing 1 (PW1) rated TF on grammar by 90%, followed by the organization of ideas and coherence (80%) and vocabulary, punctuation and spelling by 70%. Contrary to this, the senior students taking Advanced Communication 2 (AC2) found it more useful to receive TF on the organization and coherence of ideas (95%) than on grammar (60%) or punctuation (50%). The difference in opinion between the two groups may be due to the fact that the students in this TEFL program who are less proficient in English and in writing typically believe that grammar and other surface matters like spelling or punctuation are the most important aspects of language learning. In fact, many commonly share the misconception that being an expert English speaker/writer

entails primarily mastering the language's grammar, seeing other aspects such as a clear and coherent development and organization of ideas as less relevant. It is possible, however, that the more expert (senior) students have reached a level of proficiency that allows them to understand that while grammar or punctuation are, indeed, important to express ideas accurately, the quality of the organization and coherence of ideas is equally or even more important in expressing ideas effectively.

The next section of the questionnaire asked students to rate the degree of usefulness of different TF practices in order to improve their writing (for the list of practices described, see the Appendix). Figure B shows that first-year students (PW1) valued indirect more than direct feedback. They preferred by 100% that the teacher indicate the location of the error and add a comment or suggestion as to how to correct it (e. g., “Perhaps you should consider a different tense” or “This idea would fit better in the conclusion”). One student claimed that although it was sometimes difficult to identify the target form of an error, “it is part of learning to know that there is an error and try to find the right form by oneself”. Seventy percent believe that receiving the correction of the error directly from the teacher is useful. In fact, one student reported that “the clearer and more direct the correction, the better”. PW1 students appreciated to a lesser degree the use of imperative sentences (40%), questions (30%), comments with exclamation points (10%), and hints of the location and type of an error without any kind of comment or suggestion (1%). Other TF practices were not valued at all by this group, such as simply marking the presence of an error or offering no correction at all and expecting the students to self-edit their work on a subsequent revision.

Figure B. Usefulness of form of correction (percentages of “useful” and “very useful” scores).



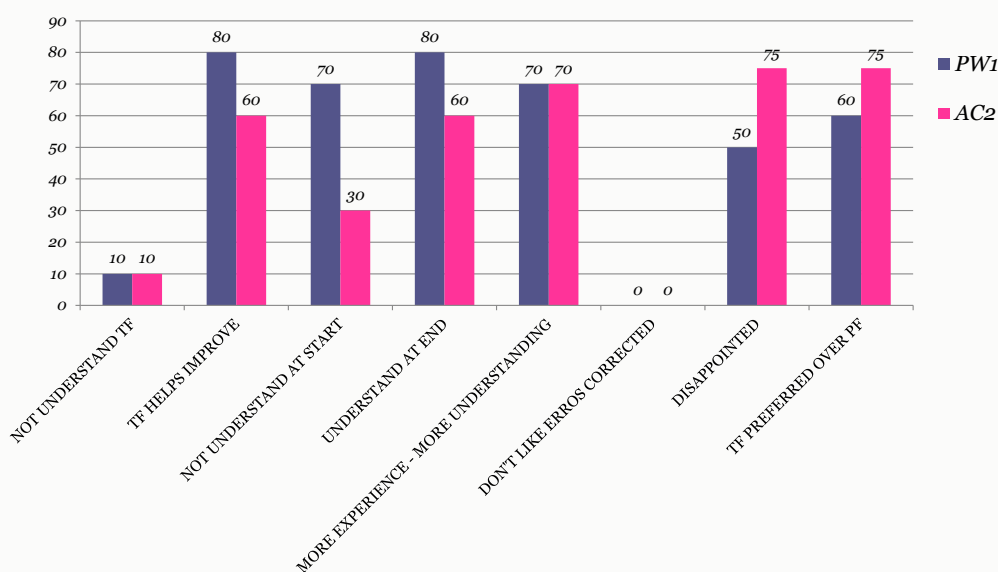
Source: Own elaboration.

Senior students (AC2) showed a similar tendency to PW1 students in their evaluation of different TF practices, also strongly preferring that the teachers indicate the location of an error with an additional comment or suggestion as to how to revise it. However, they valued direct feedback (the provision of the right answer) to a somewhat higher degree (80%) than PW1 students. Though indirect feedback (*i. e.*, an indication of error location and type) without the teacher offering a suggestion as to how to revise it was not a very popular feedback choice, AC2 students valued it more than PW1 students (45%). Once more, this might be due to the fact that being more expert writers, they do not need the teachers' comments or suggestions, simply indicating and locating the error and type would suffice. AC2 students valued imperatives less (21%) than PW1 students. This may be the result of novice students preferring the teacher telling them directly what to do out of a lack of strategies, linguistic knowledge and/or self-confidence to revise their own texts, while senior students, who are more experienced in writing and dealing with TF, may perceive an imperative as an unnecessarily dismissive order.

As to the use of exclamations, which was mostly disapproved of, one AC2 student reported that exclamations points or capital letters intended to indicate an error is only "frustrating" for students and "serves no purpose in helping in the student's evolution." Another, however, expressed that an exclamation point was useful to become aware of the seriousness of an error and "be alert so as not to do it again".

The results of Section 3, Part C of the questionnaire show several differences between PW1 and AC2 students (Figure C). In this section, students were asked to what degree they agreed with different statements that express views on TF (see Appendix). PW1 students agreed by 80% with the statement that expressed that TF helps them improve their writing in English, and that at the end of the course they understand TF better. In these two statements, AC2 students showed only 60% of agreement. In the author's experience as a writing instructor in AC2, these students often do not show as much progress as expected in improving of their writing skills. Students very commonly report in class that they do understand the feedback and see the problems in their writing once pointed out by the teachers, but they are not able to anticipate or identify these problems on their own. This might be the result of inappropriate instruction, but it may also be the result of students' lack of formal writing habits outside of college and, consequently, they struggle to improve their writing with the feedback they receive even several years into the program.

Figure C. Agreement with statements on teacher feedback (percentages of “useful” and “very useful scores”).



Source: Own elaboration.

The next statement with which PW1 and AC2 students most agreed (70% of agreement) was that the more experienced they became as writers and the more TF they received, the more they understood the feedback and corrections. However, an evident difference lies in the two groups' understanding of TF at the beginning of the course. Seventy percent of PW1 students agreed that they did not fully understand TF at the beginning of the course, whereas very few AC2 students agreed with this statement. These results answer to the second research question posed in this study as they indicate that for these students, time and expertise were key elements in perceiving the usefulness of the TF they received.

Sixty percent of PW1 students also expressed that they preferred TF to peer feedback compared to 75% of AC2 students. This can point to the fact that novice students may find their peers' assessment more approachable and are, thus, more accepting of their criticism than of their teachers'. Also, the less experienced writers do not tend to be as rigorous of others' writing and avoid corrective feedback that may be negatively perceived among peers. This can result in feedback that is perceived as friendly and motivating. Senior students, on the other hand, may have realized after several years in the TEFL program that their peers either do not always have the necessary linguistic knowledge and/or are not as critical readers as their instructors, and they know that the feedback they get from their peers may be slanted toward a more condescending and/or less accurate assessment. Thus, they would rather receive TF, which they may feel will prepare them more effectively to pass

the course. Similarly to Firthriani (2018), this might respond, too, to the hierarchical culture of the Argentine academic system in which university professors are very well regarded, and so their assessment of students' work is highly respected and expected.

AC2 students were more sensitive to the emotional impact of not receiving TF. While 50% of PW1 students claimed that they felt disappointed if they did not receive feedback from their instructors, 75% of AC2 students agreed that they felt disappointed if they did not receive it. In the open-ended question, only AC2 students expressed their emotions as to the TF received. Several reported that they felt frustrated, insecure and discouraged from improving their writing as a result of receiving only corrective feedback, which they perceived as "negative", without any positive criticism as to the aspects of their writing the teachers found effective.

The fact that more AC2 than PW1 students seemed to be more emotional about TF may be, first, due to the higher expertise developed over the years in understanding the importance of TF in improving their writing and passing the course. Second, AC2 is one of the most challenging language courses in the program, and is among the last ones students need to pass to graduate, two factors that can add anxiety and a greater sense of urgency to receive feedback that can help them achieve this goal. Novice students, though, may have not yet understood how important paying attention to TF is to improve their writing performance and to obtain a passing grade as their trajectories in the program have started only recently, and the ultimate goal to graduate might be felt as too far ahead for them. As to the statement that students dislike being corrected on their errors, both groups disagreed. This contrasts with what has been reported by teachers who believe that students do not like to be corrected (López Casoli and Berardo, 2020).

To summarize the results obtained, it can be stated that there is some common ground in the value that both novice and senior students assign to different TF practices. In general terms, both groups preferred direct over indirect feedback and TF over peer feedback. Neither group found the feedback formulated as questions or exclamations too useful and neither valued TF that only highlights the location but not the kind of error. The strategy of returning writings to students without any kind of feedback was not perceived as useful at all. For both groups, the most useful form of TF was the location of an error together with a comment or suggestion on how to revise it. Both expressed that TF became more understandable towards the end of the course, and that the more experience in writing they had and the more TF they received, the more they understood the feedback. Neither group reported

that they disliked being corrected on their errors. Finally, both groups reported, though to different degrees, that TF helps them improve their writing.

The greater differences between the two groups were that while first-year students highly preferred TF grammar, senior students valued more the TF related to the organization and coherence of ideas. Moreover, novice students did not see much value in TF that only indicated the location and type of error; senior students, on the other hand, valued this strategy to a great extent. Senior students seem to be more influenced by the emotional impact of TF, thus, they did not find imperative sentences useful and felt more disappointed than first-year students if they do not receive TF.

5. Conclusions and pedagogical implications

It can be concluded from the results that there seem to be some gaps between students' and teachers' expectations and preferences. For instance, students are much more prone to receiving direct feedback than teachers are willing to provide it. Teachers often state that they feel using indirect feedback is more conducive to learning as students are expected to find out the ways to correct their own errors, which also helps to develop student autonomy (López Casoli and Berardo, 2018). Students may not be aware of this. Thus, as Saito (1994) recommends, teachers should explain to students prior to the assessment stage which are the views that inform and guide their pedagogical feedback practices, which echoes one of the student's opinion: "teachers should unify their assessment criteria and share them with the students".

This research has also evidenced that students find TF is necessary to help them improve their writing. However, the results also indicate that the degree of usefulness of TF varies according to the different stages of the learning process within one single course (from the start to the end) and from a first-year course to a fourth-year course. This leads to the conclusion that since students' perceptions of TF change over time, teachers should re-evaluate their feedback practices regularly, so that they best serve students' writing skills development at different stages of their academic trajectory.

This is not to say that the way we provide feedback should be determined entirely by our students' perceptions. Yet, as educators we need to consider students' changes in views and attitudes towards feedback to ensure that our efforts in providing

feedback meet students that are open to receive it. Hence, our feedback practices can be adjusted to the varying academic needs at different stages of the learning process. This will be more effective in helping students achieve the ultimate goal of becoming proficient writers.

The different ways in which teachers express feedback can be counterproductive. While teachers may feel that formulating feedback through questions can be perceived as less imposing and more encouraging for the students (Hyland and Hyland, 2001; Ferris, 1997), this is not a feedback style the students in this study highly valued. The emotional impact of TF should not be overlooked either. The different forms of TF can, unintentionally, result in students that are reluctant to accept it or that adopt a negative attitude toward writing, while omitting to give feedback can result in disappointed students.

If our goal as teachers in providing feedback is to help students improve in any given area of their learning process, we must ensure that our practice is informed not only by theoretical principles but also by what actually happens inside our classrooms. Thus, research on students' perceptions of their own learning process and of the pedagogical practices they are exposed to can shed light as to whether or not their views are in line with those of their instructors. This kind of studies offers relevant information to teachers, who can, then, use it to make appropriate adjustments to their teaching practice in their students' best academic interests.

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Appendix

Questionnaire SECTION 3 – Students' perceptions of teacher feedback on their writings

PART A: What aspects of your writing do you find more useful for your instructor to correct?

1: not at all useful – 2: not very useful - 3: neutral - 4: quite useful – 5: very useful

1. Organization of ideas in a text
2. Coherence and cohesion of ideas
3. Grammar
4. Vocabulary
5. Punctuation
6. Spelling

PART B: How do you prefer your teacher to correct your texts in order to improve your writing?

1: not at all useful – 2: not very useful - 3: neutral - 4: quite useful – 5: very useful

1. Indicating location and type of error but without offering the right answer (e. g. “wrong tense” o “spelling” o “unclear idea”).
2. Asking a question to indicate an error (e. g. “Is this the right tense?” o “Is this a relevant idea?”).
3. Using the imperative to indicate an error (e. g. “Change tense” o “Rephrase”).
4. Writing the right answer directly.
5. Indicating location of the error and adding a comment or suggestion as to how to correct it (e. g. “Perhaps you should consider a different tense” o “This idea would fit better in the conclusion”).
6. Using an exclamation point to indicate an error (e. g. “wrong tense!”, “sp!”, “irrelevant!”).
7. Indicating where the error is but without adding any comment or suggestion on the type of error.
8. Giving no indication of location or type of error (let students find errors themselves in future revisions).

OPEN QUESTION: If you like, you can justify or add a comment on your preferences on the different ways of correcting an error.

PART C: On a scale from 1 to 5, how much do you agree with these statements?

1: Strongly disagree - 2: Disagree - 3: Neutral - 4: Agree - 5: Strongly agree

1. I do not understand the feedback I receive from my instructors on my texts.
2. The feedback I receive from my teachers helps me improve my writing in English.
3. When I first started to take the course, I did not entirely understand the teachers' feedback.
4. At the end of the course, I understand the teachers' feedback better.
5. The more I write texts in English and the more teachers' feedback I receive, the more I understand their feedback and corrections.
6. I do not like my errors to be corrected.
7. I feel disappointed if I do not receive feedback from instructors on my texts.
8. I prefer teacher feedback to peer feedback.

OPEN QUESTION: If you like, add any comments on TF on your written texts.