

Unpacking Teachers' Feedback on Students' Writing: A Content Analysis of Writing Exemplars

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v6i2.506>

*Antonius Ikrar Asmarajati Laga Tukan¹, Fransiscus Xaverius Mukarto²

English Language Studies, Universitas Sanata Dharma

Corresponding Author ikrartukan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Feedback is crucial for facilitating student learning and growth. Recognizing the significance of effective feedback provision, this study aimed to elucidate the types and aspects of feedback from teachers crucial for enhancing student writing proficiency. The study centers on analyzing teachers' written feedback provided on student writing exemplars sourced from the New Zealand Curriculum. Employing content analysis methodology, the researchers investigated the feedback types employed by teachers to improve student writing skills. The findings revealed a varied distribution of feedback types. The results of the study on writing exemplars at different levels indicate that feedback is given both directly and indirectly, with a focus on form in the lower levels of writing and a shift towards a focus on content in the higher levels. The feedback is fairly balanced between direct and indirect, with a higher percentage of indirect feedback. In the lower levels, form-focused feedback dominates, while in the higher levels, content-focused feedback becomes more prominent. This suggests a progression in the emphasis on content as writing skills develop. It suggests that indirect feedback is particularly conducive to enhancing writing proficiency among advanced students, empowering them to independently rectify errors. By uncovering the subtle interaction between different feedback approaches and the proficiency levels of student writers, our study provides meaningful perspectives for teachers aiming to enhance feedback strategies.

Keywords: direct feedback, indirect feedback, feedback on form, feedback on forms, writing

Article History:

Received 28th May 2024

Accepted 25th June 2024

Published 02nd Juli 2024



INTRODUCTION

Writing is a crucial skill in English and must be mastered by a student apart from listening, reading, and speaking. Writing is a skill that is as important as listening, speaking, and reading skills (Simanihuruk et al., 2021; Yusrita, 2020). Harmer (2001) stated that writing skill is a type of communication used for conveying ideas or feelings in a written composition. With good writing skill, someone can convey or communicate his points or ideas to their readers or audiences (Simanihuruk et al., 2021; Yusrita, 2020). Writing skills require knowledge and abilities, for example, determining the correct tenses or grammar, the ability to choose words that match a topic or idea, and also the ability to compose sentences into a clear unit. Harmer (2001) asserted that writing is a cognitive activity. Moreover, Harmer (2001) claims that writing may be prepared and delivered with a limitless amount of adjustments prior to publication. In learning writing, students will be asked to write about a certain topic based on a certain text type. When students engage in writing, they are expected to adhere to certain norms encompassing content, syntax, language usage, and vocabulary (Yusrita, 2020). Consequently, teachers must provide feedback to guide students in identifying and rectifying any errors or areas requiring revision within their writing.

One of the most crucial elements of teaching writing is giving students feedback, which can come in the form of collaborative discussion between students themselves, written remark, error correction, or teacher-student discussions. Providing feedback is regarded to

be a crucial role of a teacher in guiding students in their learning process. Since it examines whether the students' writing has achieved the standard or not it becomes a necessary tool (Mawar, 2018). Feedback is a response related to students' abilities or understanding so that teachers can see the development of students' abilities and they can find out the next steps that can be taken to improve the learning process so that it can be even better. As noted by Cen & Zheng (2024), it offers constructive and evaluative information into students' comprehension and execution of writing assignments. By providing such feedback, teachers can effectively track and enhance students' learning outcomes and processes, while also gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges they face. More importantly, Laurillard argues that students can enhance their learning accomplishment by receiving proper feedback, as it is widely acknowledged that a teacher's instructional actions are likely ineffective without it (as cited in Wang et al., 2023).

Feedback on students' writing has become an interest for many studies conducted by teachers or lecturers. Based on the methods of providing, feedback is categorized into direct and indirect feedback. A study conducted by (Darmanto et al., 2020) shows that teachers prefer to do direct written feedback over indirect one because indirect written feedback is confusing to most students even though it can assist in their transition to independence and can elicit their errors. The result is similar to a study conducted in Bangladesh (Zaman & Azad, 2012). The study demonstrates how well the students value immediate direct feedback. They may not be confident in identifying and correcting their mistakes as a result of their lack of English proficiency.

According to their respective areas of focus, feedback on writing can be divided into two types namely, feedback on the form and feedback on the content. Feedback on the form includes grammar and mechanics (Elwood & Bode, 2014; Fan & Xu, 2020; Shobeiry, 2020). Teachers who provide feedback concentrate on the details that come together to form words, phrases, and paragraphs, such as spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Meanwhile, feedback on content focuses on the overall organization of a text, beginning with the goal of writing, types of texts, clarity of writing, and important concepts (Elwood & Bode, 2014; Shobeiry, 2020). This type of feedback addresses issues such as clarity of expression, logical development of ideas, coherence between paragraphs, and relevance to the intended audience or purpose of the writing.

However, practically, most teachers focus only on the students' grammar instead of the content. Feedback on forms is becoming more often the focus of teachers or educators because it can be seen explicitly or teachers can immediately identify grammatical errors or spelling errors even though teachers for students with high proficiency presumably start put their concerns on feedback on content in their students' writings (Hyland, 2013). An analysis of Indonesian teachers reveals that they tend to emphasize on grammar, make trendy remarks, and draw too much attention to the negative aspects of the subject when giving feedback (Sari, 2017). According to another study conducted by Mariano *et al.* (2022), most teachers concentrated on teaching the more technical, or secretarial, parts of writing, like punctuation and the precise structure of the genre. The researchers were intrigued by the prospect of investigating the written feedback provided by teachers on students' writing compositions

Therefore, the researchers aimed to investigate various kinds of feedback on the writing exemplar from *Te Kete Ipurangi*, New Zealand's bilingual education portal initiated by the Ministry of Education. To begin, TKI exemplars undergo rigorous curation and evaluation by educational experts, ensuring their alignment with established standards and curricula. Subsequently, they serve as standardized benchmarks for evaluating writing proficiency across diverse contexts and skill levels. Moreover, TKI exemplars accompany comprehensive feedback and annotations, furnishing teachers with insights into effective feedback methodologies. The formulated research questions are (a) What types of feedback are used in the writing exemplar? and (b) How is the feedback applied to different levels of writing?

METHOD

Design

A research design that is suitable to answer the research question was content analysis. Content analysis allowed the researchers to aim for a systematic and objective analysis of the document. According to Gómez-Galán, a document can be either textual material or a visual depiction (as cited in Fitria, 2022). It helps identify patterns, themes, and specific elements in teachers' feedback to offer a representative snapshot of students' writing proficiency levels and to facilitate an initial exploration of teachers' responses to standardized writing samples. According to (Krippendorff, 2013), content analysis is a structured, repeatable process that condenses a large number of words of text into a smaller number of classifications based on detailed coding rules. Fraenkel et al. (2022) also define content analysis as a method used by researchers to analyse communications to gain an indirect understanding of human behaviour.

Data Collecting

The researchers used stratified sampling in selecting samples. Stratified sampling is a way of taking samples for populations that have heterogeneous characteristics or the characteristics of a varied population) and it is also used when the population has stratified members or elements (Sugiyono, 2016). Five levels of transactional writing were represented by five exemplars that are available on *Te Kete Ipurangi*, New Zealand's bilingual education portal established by the Ministry of Education. Then, the researchers compiled the comments on the students' writing from the exemplars. The study centers on analyzing teachers' responses to student writing exemplars sourced from *Te Kete Ipurangi* (TKI) website, New Zealand's bilingual education platform. These exemplars were chosen to offer a representative snapshot of students' writing proficiency levels and to facilitate an initial exploration of teachers' responses to standardized writing samples. The selection aimed to encompass a range of proficiency levels among students, albeit within the constraints of the available data.

Data analysis

The researchers used a table to analyze the data. The researchers identify the comments on the students' writing exemplars. They were classified into several types of feedback. Then, the researchers started to analyze the frequency of different feedback types based on the number to answer the research questions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Comments on each writing exemplar from various levels of writing were identified and tabulated. The comments are categorized based on the way the feedback is given and the focus of the feedback.

Table 1. Level 1. How Chickens Hatch

No.	Comments	Direct Feedback	Indirect Feedback	Focus on Form	Focus on Content
1	chicken	√		√	
2	has	√		√	
3	baby	√		√	
4	tooth	√		√	
5	help	√		√	
6	out	√		√	
7	boiled	√		√	
8	Attempts to write a simple idea as an explanation from a personal perspective		√		√
9	Attempts a compound sentence		√		√
10	Uses key topic-appropriate words and some high-frequency words		√		√
11	Spells some high-frequency words correctly		√	√	
12	Identify most initial letter sounds		√	√	

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13	Experiments with capital letters and full stops	√	√		
14	Leaves space between most words	√	√		
15	Demonstrates consistency in directionality	√	√		
Total (%)		47%	53%	80%	20%

According to the table above, the comments or feedback given directly or indirectly are fairly balanced. 47 percent of feedback is provided directly, while 53 percent is provided indirectly. Form-focused feedback accounts for 80 percent of all feedback. However, there is a lack of focus on content, with only 20% of the feedback being content-focused. The comments indicate that the writing attempts to explain a simple idea from a personal perspective uses key topic-appropriate words, and demonstrates consistency in directionality. The evidence suggests that the feedback is given both directly and indirectly and most of the feedback focuses on the form in the lowest level of writing.

Table 2. Level 2. How a Spider's Web Forms

No.	Comments	Direct Feedback	Indirect Feedback	Focus on Form	Focus on Content
1	Includes ideas that are mostly objectives		√		√
2	Supports data with some details		√		√
3	Use poetic language features to engage the reader		√		√
4	Uses precise verbs in present tense		√	√	
5	Begins to sequence explanation with some confidence: starting with topic definition, ending with summary statements		√		√
6	Use paragraphs confidently		√		√
7	Uses a range of time-relationships words to express sequence		√		√
8	Begins to use paragraphs		√		√
9	Mainly simple and compound sentences		√		√
10	Varied beginnings		√		√
11	Demonstrates good understanding of all basic sounds and patterns in written English-errors are mostly sensible		√	√	
12	Uses most grammatical conventions with supports		√	√	
13	Punctuates with increasing independence		√	√	
Total (%)		0%	100%	31%	69%

According to the table above, all the feedback for writing at this level is given indirectly, with a strong focus on the form of the writing. The comments suggest that the writing includes mostly objective ideas, supports data with some details, and uses precise verbs in the present tense. The feedback is mostly form-focused, with 69 percent of the comments focusing on form and 31 percent on content. The evidence suggests that the feedback is given both directly and indirectly and most of the feedback focuses on the form in the lowest level of writing.

Table 3. Level 3. How to make a Hangi?

No.	Comments	Direct Feedback	Indirect Feedback	Focus on Form	Focus on Content
1	Includes ideas that are mostly objectives		√		√
2	Supports data with some comments		√		√
3	Sequences explanation confidently: begins with topic definition, ends with summary statement		√		√

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4	Uses some time-relationship words	√		√
5	Beginning to use relationship phrases to link ideas	√		√
6	Use paragraphs confidently	√		√
7	Uses variety of structures, beginnings and lengths	√		√
8	Uses key topic-appropriate words	√		√
9	Uses precise and colorful verbs and some adjectives for impact	√	√	
10	Beginning to demonstrate confidence with passive voice	√	√	
11	Demonstrates good understanding of most basic sounds and patterns in written English-errors will be easily amended with spelling aid	√	√	
12	Uses most grammatical conventions well with support, given that using passive voice is new to him	√	√	
13	Punctuates with increasing independence-errors should be easily amended with revisions	√	√	
Total (%)		0%	100%	38% 62%

The table above indicates that the total comments or feedback given directly or indirectly are utterly contradictory. All feedback is delivered indirectly. The comments indicate that the writing includes mostly objective ideas, supports data with some comments, and sequences the explanation confidently. The feedback is predominantly content-focused, with 62 percent of the comments focusing on content and 38 percent on form. The evidence suggests that the feedback is given indirectly and most of the feedback focuses on the content.

Table 4. Level 4. How were Mummies Made?

No.	Comments	Direct Feedback	Indirect Feedback	Focus on Form	Focus on Content
1	Support explanation with objective ideas. These are supported with specific details		√		√
2	Sequences explanation logically (introduction, conclusion) with confidence		√		√
3	Organizes ideas into paragraphs and makes logical links between them.		√		√
4	Uses a range of time-relationships words to express sequence		√		√
5	Uses a variety of structures, beginnings, and lengths		√		√
6	Uses precise topic-appropriate words		√		√
7	Uses passive voice		√		√
8	Uses most grammatical conventions accurately: some errors in the sentence construction		√	√	
9	Makes deliberate effort, in editing, to change to passive voice for effect		√	√	
10	Spells most key content words and high-frequency words correctly		√	√	
11	Uses capital, full stops, and commas with consistency.		√	√	
12	Uses most grammatical conventions accurately: some errors in the sentence		√	√	

Total (%)	0%	100%	42%	58%
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The table above indicates that the feedback for writing at this level is given indirectly, with a focus on the content of the writing. The comments suggest that the writing supports the explanation with objective ideas, sequences the explanation logically, and organizes ideas into paragraphs. The feedback is mostly content-focused, with 58 percent of the comments focusing on content and 42 percent on form.

Table 5. Level 5. Why Cockroaches Are Weird!

No.	Writings	Direct Feedback	Indirect Feedback	Focus on Form	Focus on Content
1	Supports explanation with a range of detailed reasons that are interesting and precisely expresses. Some of these take the reader in lateral directions		√		√
2	Sequence explanation confidently		√		√
3	Links main and supporting ideas within paragraphs		√		√
4	Includes a strong introduction and conclusion		√		√
5	Uses a variety of sentence structures with considerable impact. This include rhetorical questions		√		√
6	Selects and uses a range of precise vocabulary that is both topic-appropriate and chosen to appeal to the audience		√		√
7	Uses an informal style (humor and colloquialisms) deliberately to engage her reader		√		√
8	Using features such as rhetorical questions and comparisons with control and intent		√		√
9	Uses the writing conventions of grammar, spelling, and punctuation with only few intrusive errors, most of which could be easily attended to with more careful proofreading.		√	√	
Total		0%	100%	11 %	89%

The feedback for writing at this level is given indirectly, with a strong focus on the content of the writing. The comments indicate that the writing supports the explanation with a range of detailed reasons, sequences the explanation confidently, and uses a variety of sentence structures with considerable impact. The feedback is overwhelmingly content-focused, with 89 percent of the comments focusing on content and only 11 percent on form. Based on the amount of feedback that has been analysed above, several things can be drawn. Firstly, at lower writing proficiency levels, the feedback predominantly targets form, indicating corrections for misspelled words, often underlined and accompanied by the correct spelling even though content-focused feedback is still there. Second, at all levels, providing feedback does not only focus on either form or content but combines both. Lastly, at higher proficiency levels, indirect feedback becomes more prevalent. Even though mechanical errors are identified, there's a shift away from underlining or circling incorrect words or punctuation.

Discussion

Based on the exemplars that have been observed, the feedback focus is divided into two forms, namely feedback on the surface level and feedback on the deeper level. The two

types of feedback are in line with the focus on the forms and the focus on the contents that has been mentioned in the introduction (Elwood & Bode, 2014; Fan & Xu, 2020; Shobeiry, 2020) meanwhile based on the way they are given is divided into direct feedback and indirect feedback (Elwood & Bode, 2014; Ghandi & Maghsoudi, 2014; Westmacott, 2017).

It is easier for lower-level students to fix writing errors when they receive direct feedback. For instance, they can easily rectify errors by writing the proper spelling next to the incorrect words, as demonstrated in the level 1 exemplar. As stated by Gonzalez-Torres & Sarango (2023), teaching students with lesser levels of English proficiency requires a more effective method, direct feedback. Students who are at that level have not been able to work on indirect feedback when given one. Students who are unable to revise their errors can benefit greatly from direct feedback, which gives them specific guidance about their errors.

According to research conducted by Zaman & Azad (2012) 75% of the teachers they spoke with claimed that their students' low writing proficiency prevented them from being competent enough to revise their writing. In the absence of them "doing" self-correction, the teacher must provide direct feedback. Direct feedback indicates that the teacher is more engaged in the correcting process than the student because the students do not require much processing in correcting or revising their writing (Ellis, 2009). This is in line with Darmanto et al. (2020) who argue that giving immediate feedback has drawbacks because it takes a lesser amount of thought on the part of those receiving it, but direct corrective feedback is more suitable for students at less proficient levels who are lacking in the ability required to obtain a perfect form of their own notion. A study conducted in Iran shows that it is not desired or effective to improve spelling accuracy in such a classroom by giving the students only direct feedback from the teacher without involving them in the review and correction process (Baleghizadeh & Dadashi, 2011).

In students' writing at a higher level, namely levels 3 and 5, indirect feedback is the main choice because students have higher proficiency levels in writing. By getting indirect feedback, students are able to process mistakes that have been made and correct them themselves. Indirect feedback indicates that teachers must involve students in correcting their mistakes in writing, not only providing them with the correct forms as what teachers tend to do when they are in lower level or grades. Rather than providing students with precise phrases or word structures, indirect feedback performs better for enhancing students' dictation over direct feedback (Baleghizadeh & Dadashi 2011). According to their study, during a six-week period, spelling errors were handled differently for students in the direct feedback group compared to those in the indirect feedback group. It shows that indirect feedback requires maximum processing on the part of the learner.

At the low level, it is common when the focus on form feedback is done to build the basics of writing. A study found that when students write in their first and second years, teachers seem to concentrate mostly on the more obvious parts of writing, like grammar and punctuation (Mariano et al., 2022). Another study on tertiary teachers found that students feel powerless and confused when they receive feedback that is limited to content and organization. (Zaman & Azad, 2012). It implies there is a shift from teachers' focus in the focus of feedback from the basic elements such as grammar and punctuation in the early years to a more comprehensive approach that considers content and organization at a higher academic level.

Assuming that the students already understand the mechanics such as grammar and punctuation, students will be ready to display their ideas in their writing. Mariano et al. (2022) argue that it is beneficial to focus on the students' limited abilities in the early elementary school years because, if they are mastered to automaticity, students' cognitive attention can be pointed onto higher-level comprehending, which includes generating ideas and composing them into their writing. Ellis (1994) believes that while understanding meaning requires more conscious thinking, understanding of form rests on implicit learning. As the writing levels go higher, teachers focus on giving focus on content feedback since writing tasks require the students to communicate their ideas instead of merely writing sentences in the correct forms and punctuations. Zahida et al., (2014) argues that the

comments on the content of the work are intended to encourage students to focus more on the necessary content and ideas. Instead of highlighting particular grammatical errors, teachers can offer broad remarks on instances where the text is illogical or offer commentary on logical lapses in writing.

Receiving content feedback has more impact on students' ability to produce better writing. An experiment conducted by Olson & Raffeld (1987) shows that compared to the other treatment group, the essay writing of the treatment group that got comments on content was noticeably superior. On the course content test, the treatment group that got content comments and the control group performed noticeably better. However, research conducted by (Shobeiry, 2020) shows that the combination of content-focused feedback and form-focused feedback significantly outperforms compared to providing only content-focused or form-focused feedback for writing improvement. This is in line with the result of this study where teacher's feedback shows the combination of them.

Teachers have many responsibilities to cover in teaching the students. Thus, in the short time available, they should concentrate on the subject matter that the students have written rather than correcting and commenting on every spelling and punctuation error. As Erkan (2022) states teachers spend a lot of time providing extremely comprehensive comments on sentence-level mechanics such as error codes. However, as stated above, it is not just mechanical or form feedback that must be given, but content feedback must also be provided on students' writing (Blanka Pojslová, 2024). Therefore, a teacher should not spend a lot of time only providing mechanical feedback but also on content and organization. This is in line with research results from Dabboub (2019) which shows that a sizeable amount of students feel that receiving content-focused feedback is very important because they want their writing to be well organized and communicative. Time should be better spent reacting to the most significant components of students' writing, such as choosing and employing a variety of exact terminology that is simultaneously topic-appropriate and intended to be captivating to readers.

The interesting thing that can be seen from the feedback given to students' writing is that it is dominated by neutral and positive comments that focus on what students can do or what students can improve in writing instead of focusing on what they cannot do, such as "spells some high-frequency words correctly." The feedback shows that the teacher appreciates the student's attempt to write high-frequency words correctly even though some of them are incorrect instead of writing negative comments. According to Brookhart, two pivotal aspects of effective writing feedback from teachers encompass both the choice of words and the overall tone employed (as cited in Sari, 2017). Furthermore, this approach fosters engagement, which encompasses students' levels of focus, curiosity, and enthusiasm, all crucial for advancing their language skills and learning abilities (Zhang & Hyland, 2018). It fosters engagement by emphasizing positive reinforcement and constructive feedback. In another study, Zheng & Yu (2018) define affective engagement as comprising three main elements: emotions felt during the process of revising written work based on feedback (affect), personal and moral evaluations made about the feedback received (judgment), and the perceived value or significance attributed to the feedback (appreciation). In simpler terms, affective engagement involves how students feel, what they think about the feedback they receive, and how much they value it during the revision process.

As a teacher, one could respond positively to their students' writing and the students will be more engaging in revising their writing. The research findings from (Ghandi & Maghsoudi, 2014) indicate that when students are not actively involved in revising and correcting their work, receiving direct feedback or feedback solely from teachers is ineffective and not preferred for enhancing accuracy in the classroom. Therefore, with positive feedback, students are likely to respond well to the criticism they receive and are motivated to overcome their own writing mistakes, thereby improving their writing skills. A study conducted by Udu (2021) suggests that students' writing achievement will increase if they are encouraged to keep good attitudes toward writing. Other than that, students also will have the urge to revise their writing. Additionally, written feedback has been shown to

boost students' confidence in writing and revising their work feedback (Sari, 2017). Research by Seker & Dincer (2014) indicates that students begin addressing feedback right away when they feel positive emotions, such as motivation and fulfillment. Conversely, they tend to delay working on feedback when experiencing negative emotions, like annoyance or embarrassment. Despite potentially achieving similar outcomes, the initial emotional response significantly influences the students' approach and perspective toward the feedback process.

CONCLUSIONS

Direct feedback is suitable for students who are at a low level or students with low writing skills because of their inability to process an advanced thinking process. Indirect feedback sharpens students with higher levels of writing proficiency to make self-corrections in their writing, in other words, the higher the level of writing proficiency, the less direct feedback the teacher provides. This is in line with providing feedback that focuses more on content for students who are at a higher level of writing skills compared to focusing on forms because it requires the students to communicate their ideas to their readers instead of merely writing sentences in the correct forms which are more emphasized on students who show a low level proficiency on their writing. In addition, it has more impact on students' ability to produce better writing. It should be emphasized, however, that this does not override the importance of grammatical accuracy. There should be some kind of compromise between form and content that must be aimed for, but still slightly weigh more on content. In addition, positive feedback is required to show appreciation and give a positive mood to the students so that they are more motivated to write.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Mukarto who helped to provide meaningful contributions and suggestions for this article. I would like to thank my family members who support my academic research work.

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