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**Use of electronic feedback in second language writing:  
teachers' and students' views**

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## **Use of electronic feedback in second language writing: teachers' and students' views**

### **ABSTRACT**

Feedback has always been considered important in second language writing. Quite recently due to various reasons, electronic feedback has become one of the frequently applied types (Zareekbatani, 2015; Ene & Upton, 2018). The aim of the research study was therefore to identify lecturers' and students' views on the use of online comments provided on the second language writing tasks. The data was collected through conducting online semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students and lecturers of one Uzbek university. The findings revealed that a variety of comments given on different aspects of the written assessment tasks in the Google documents and combined with additional oral feedback were effective. The article aims at discussing the detailed findings of the research study and providing possible suggestions for language teachers on the use of electronic feedback in L2 writing.

**Keywords:** *electronic feedback, second-language writing, undergraduate students, Google Docs*

### **Introduction**

Providing feedback has always been considered an important constituent of the teaching and learning process. Hyland and Hyland clarify that feedback is “seen as an important developmental tool moving learners through multiple drafts towards the capability for effective self-expression” (Hyland, 2006, p. 83). The ways comments are provided to students might depend on different aspects including the nature of the task, availability of technological tools, teachers' beliefs, students' knowledge and skills, and many others. Language teachers give comments on different types of assessment tasks, especially on the formative ones, on a regular basis. Irons notes that formative feedback “should provide positive student learning opportunities, encourage dialogue and discourse between students and teachers, enhance the student learning experience and provide motivation for students” (Irons, 2008, p.8). Feedback might be given orally, when teachers and students discuss the quality of the assignment either one-on-one, in small groups or with the whole class. Written comments are another common way of feedback giving, which is practiced for individual and groupwork tasks. Brookhart explains that the mode of feedback might depend on different aspects including the type of an assignment, students' abilities, and their age (Brookhart, 2008).

Written assignments are regarded as the most challenging among the university students; therefore, lecturers usually devote much time to the feedback on learners' writing so that it might contribute to the development and improvement of this skill. Although oral and written comments have been the most common ways, due to the development of technology and availability of different online tools, lecturers started applying online feedback. Hyland and Hyland suggest differentiating between two types of providing computer-mediated feedback, e.g., synchronously, when teachers and students communicate online in real time, and asynchronously, when they communicate via email or discussion boards (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Specifically, online comments can be provided in the Word document, which might include track changes and additional commentaries on the written task and can be sent to the students via email. Another common way is the use of the Google documents, which have very similar editing functions to the Word document, but the comments are kept online and are available to both teachers and students. The third way of providing electronic feedback (e-feedback) is through the online discussion boards, which might be available on the Learning Management Systems (LMS) of the higher education institutions (Ene & Upton, 2018).

After the outbreak of the pandemic at the beginning of 2020, university lecturers were required to change the mode of teaching and quickly select the internet-based sources that might be useful for remote teaching (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; Lv, X., Ren & Xie, 2021). English language teachers additionally had to find the way(s) they would provide feedback on the written assignments that were produced and submitted online. Depending on the task requirements, lecturers' and students' opportunities, Internet connection, and many other factors, each university department and team members chose the way they would provide e-feedback. Although giving online comments was not new in teaching language skills (Saadi & Saadat, 2015; Zareekbatani, 2015; McGrath & Atkinson-Leadbetter, 2016; Johnson, Stellmack & Barthel, 2019; Saeed & Al Qunayeer, 2020), it was the first time when only remote teaching was possible and technologically supported feedback was provided on the assessment tasks.

A similar situation was observed in one international university in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), where English language lecturers switched to online mode of teaching and providing feedback, which was not common before the pandemic started. As both teachers and students experienced this process for the first time, the purpose of the current study was to identify their views on the use and effectiveness of electronic comments on the second language written assignments.

## **Methods**

Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with the English language teachers and first-year students, who were involved in the feedback process. The participants of the study are multilingual speaking Uzbek, Tajik, Karakalpak, Russian, Tatar or Korean. English is a foreign language for all students, who were required to provide an IELTS certificate upon entrance to the university. Both

teachers and learners have different levels of knowledge of some other languages including German, French, Spanish, Turkish, and Arabic.

The first-year students were tasked to produce a written assignment, which should be submitted several times to the teachers online for formative feedback at certain period within a semester. Every lecturer was required to give electronic comments on the learners' tasks and be available for additional online discussions on a regular basis. The final written assignment was also submitted online, and students were able to see teachers' comments in the LMS. Both teachers and students were provided with a consent form before the interview, which guaranteed confidentiality of their responses and gave them an opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point. As the interviews with the participants were conducted after the marks were published, no influence on the feedback process and responses was made.

## **Results**

The interview was aimed at finding out the types of comments provided, the areas identified by teachers, and participants' views on the effectiveness of formative e-feedback for improving the quality of second language writing.

### *Types of comments*

Based on the interview analysis several types of comments were identified. The English language teachers provided suggestions for improvement of the written task, which were usually given in the margins of the Google document. Some of the common suggestions included changing the structure of written tasks, providing relevant and reliable sources, using academic vocabulary, and being objective in writing. Another common type of e-feedback was detailed explanation of the mistakes made in the written assignment and the nature of the task. For instance, the lecturers explained how to make the written piece more logically organized, why long block citations should be avoided in essay writing, how the sources should be properly referenced within the text, and what sentence structures might be used. Recommendations provided by the language teachers as side comments were also mentioned in the interviews. These included the links to the websites that might be helpful for improving students' grammar and word choice, the use of a referencing guide to correct the citations and referring to the relevant seminar to revise the material.

Only few participants informed about error corrections made via the track changes in the written tasks. Some common examples were related to the use of language, i.e., word forms, sentence structures, irrelevant statements, and others. Teachers either crossed out the errors in the document or provided the correct word or phrase, which was a rare case. Two students mentioned that teachers also referred to the assessment criteria of the written task, which was done by providing a link to the coursework description available on the LMS or copy-pasting a description of the relevant criterion

into the side comments. Several participants referred to leading questions on the content of the written task, which were provided by the language teachers in the Google document.

Both lecturers and students informed that the focus of the online comments was made on different aspects of the written assignment. E-feedback was mostly provided on the content and structure of the written piece. Comments on the relevance and logical flow of ideas were another common area identified in the students' papers. Online feedback was also provided on the use and referencing of sources in the written tasks. Writing style and use of language (grammar structures, word choice and mechanics) were not mentioned as the mostly frequent aspects of electronic feedback.

### *Views on online feedback*

The findings of the interview showed that all teachers provided written electronic feedback i.e., marginal comments in the Google document, and some combined it with oral comments via Zoom (during teachers' office hours) or online discussion boards. The lecturers presented different perspectives on the use and effectiveness of e-feedback on the quality of second language writing. The majority informed that the types and focus of the comments depended on the quality of students' written work. The teachers gave a larger number of suggestions for improvement and detailed explanation if the paper was poorly written and required much improvement. Those written works which met the task requirements did not take much time for giving feedback and therefore teachers provided recommendations and referred students to the relevant seminar material for enhancing the writing quality.

The lecturers informed that they tried to avoid using metalanguage and to make their comments clear as the students should be able to understand them. In case the feedback seemed vague, the teachers organized online sessions with the students to clarify the points made in the Google documents or posted additional comments on the task in the discussion boards. Brookhart (2008) highlights that clarity in feedback is very important as students have different backgrounds and experience, which might have either positive or negative impact on comprehending teachers' comments. The participants felt that e-feedback gave an opportunity for creating a meaningful dialogue between them and learners as there was a possibility to have an online discussion in the Google document, which was available at any time to both parties. However, a few teachers mentioned that sometimes providing e-feedback was time-consuming as they should be careful in choosing the relevant comments, identifying the proper areas for improvement, and providing the right amount of feedback to each student. That is why, some lecturers informed that when they checked the updated version of the written task that was not improved much, they felt that their comments were not appreciated by all the students.

The students' views on the e-feedback were mostly positive. They considered it to be helpful in improving the content and structure of the written task. A few learners mentioned that teachers' reference to the task requirements helped them to understand the nature of the task much better. The

majority regarded online comments provided by the language teachers to be important as they could get a higher mark for the final submission. Some students also informed that the e-feedback they received was useful in other subjects at the university. For example, the comments on referencing the sources, logical organization of ideas, proper structure of the written assignment and following the task requirements were applicable in other contexts as well. A few participants mentioned that feedback given in the Google documents resembled an online dialogue as they were able to discuss their written work with the teachers inside the document and refer to it whenever they wanted. Irons (2008) explains that formative feedback should be dialogic as it might promote open discussion and acceptance of critical comments by learners. For most students online comments were clear, and they could easily apply what they were recommended to; only some of them revealed that very few comments were vague, but they had an opportunity to clarify them with teachers in the online discussions.

## **Discussion**

The interview analysis revealed that language teachers had an opportunity to provide a variety of online comments in the Google document, i.e., explanation, suggestions, error correction, and recommendations. These results are supported by the investigation of Johnson, Stellmack and Barthel who found that in comparison to written feedback margins in the online document give an “unlimited space” for language teachers to provide as many comments as they want to (Barthel, 2019). In addition, the functions of an electronic document allowed providing detailed comments, deleting irrelevant phases and statements, asking leading questions, and organizing an online discussion of the written assignment. The students informed that feedback was not related only to correcting the language use, but commenting on the content, structure, use of reliable sources, referencing the material, academic writing style, relevance and flow of ideas. Based on the results of investigation, Ene and Upton found that e-feedback was more focused on the content-related issues rather than linguistic accuracy (Ene & Upton, 2018). Similar findings were observed in the study of McGrath and Atkinson-Leadbearer who identified that in comparison to direct changes in the language use, long comments on different language aspects given in the margins were better understood by students and led to more frequent revisions of the written texts (McGrath & Atkinson-Leadbearer, 2016).

Another positive feature of the e-feedback was its availability both for the teachers and students. The lecturers were able to comments on the written task and learners could refer to them at any time of the day. Similar results were observed by Bakla who found that in comparison to oral and written comments on paper, online feedback was more practical, and less time-consuming for learners as they could refer to teachers' comments when they wanted and quickly revise the written paper (Bakla, 2020). Interestingly, none of the respondents of the current study mentioned facing problems with the

Internet connection, which means that both parties had an opportunity to perform their task at the most convenient time. These findings are in line with Hartshorn and McMurry who identified that online teaching might be beneficial for developing students' writing skills as in comparison to speaking writing instruction does not appear to be so interactive (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020).

Online comments were found to be useful in different aspects, including the improvement of the paper content and structure, understanding the task requirements, and having an opportunity to receive a higher mark for the written assignment. These results are supported by Lv, Ren and Xie who identified that computer-mediated feedback might have a positive impact and be effective for improving the quality of L2 writing (Lv, X., Ren & Xie 2021). Based on their investigation, Saadi and Saadat (2015) explain that learners might enhance their writing skills when the e-feedback is provided systematically, as it enables them to revise their drafts. The research findings by Zareekbatani also showed that teachers' online comments encouraged students to be actively involved in the writing process and become more confident in L2 learning (Zareekbatani, 2015).

Although positive comments were provided on e-feedback, several participants mentioned that combining it with the additional clarification during online meetings and in the discussion boards helped to make the feedback clearer and more useful. These findings are in line with Saeed and Al Qunayeer who clarify that e-feedback in the Google documents is given asynchronously and is therefore limited in providing interactivity between teachers and students (Saeed & Al Qunayeer, 2020). The researchers suggested using audio feedback and combining synchronous and asynchronous ways (e.g., including online chats) that might support teacher-student interaction and be more helpful in promoting the revision of the written texts. This idea is also supported by Ene and Upton who advise combining different sources of feedback giving to enhance L2 writing skills and positively influence students' performance (Upton, 2018).

Another disadvantage of online comments mentioned by the teachers was the amount of time devoted to performing their duty. This idea is supported by Zareekbatani who found that providing e-feedback was sometimes time-inefficient and increased the teachers' workload especially when they had to concentrate on the language accuracy of the written tasks (Zareekbatani, 2015). The participants of the current study informed that as they were not able to clarify certain points face-to-face, they had to provide long detailed explanation in the margins of the Google documents and refer students to the relevant material on the LMS, so learners would be able to understand how the written task could be improved. These findings slightly differ from the study of McGrath and Atkinson-Leadbater, who revealed that although language teachers spent a great amount of time on providing online comments, they felt students' appreciation (McGrath & Atkinson-Leadbater, 2016). However, the researchers also clarify that despite providing detailed e-feedback, language instructors organized additional face-to-face sessions to discuss the written task.

## Conclusion

The current study was aimed at identifying English language teachers' and university students' views on the effectiveness of online feedback provided on the second language written assignments. The findings revealed that lecturers' e-feedback given in the Google documents is valued by the learners as they had an opportunity to receive a variety of comment types and track the changes. However, both teachers and students preferred to have a combination of oral and written electronic feedback as it allowed receiving additional comments and understand them in a clearer way. Therefore, it is recommended for English language instructors to provide feedback in different modalities so that their students might benefit from a variety and have better opportunities for enhancing the quality of their L2 written assignments.

As the study showed, university students were tasked to submit several drafts of the written paper, and teachers were required to provide e-feedback on a regular basis regardless of the quality of their writing. Some learners were less responsible in performing a proper task, and thus teachers wasted their time on providing detailed comments on a poorly written paper as they had to do it. Based on this investigation it is recommended to avoid a "must-write" drafting and provide feedback only upon students' request. Another possible suggestion for language teachers is to identify key areas for improvement that the students should focus on. In addition, lecturers should avoid giving too many detailed comments on the L2 written task.

The present study contributed to the growing body of research on computer-mediated feedback and supported some of the investigations on the effectiveness of Google document use for L2 written assignments. However, the study was conducted during the pandemic and might be limited to the resources available to the language teachers and students. Therefore, the findings should not be conclusive and further research on the use of electronic feedback on second language writing in different contexts and conditions is recommended.

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