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## Postgraduate EFL Students' Response to Feedback: What Feedback Do Students Prefer?

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### Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating postgraduate EFL students' preferences for feedback and reasons behind their preferences. This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach. Students at an English study program participated in an in-depth interview. Data were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis. Findings revealed that the majority of postgraduate EFL students in this study preferred written, specific, detailed, regular, constructive, and timely feedback. Students showed interest in the feedback they received and desired to discuss with their lecturers about the feedback. The findings emphasize the need for dialogic feedback where students and lecturers can share an understanding of what feedback is and improve the way the feedback process is done. Suggestions, implications, and limitations are also discussed.

### Keywords

Feedback, feedback preferences, perceptions of feedback

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## Introduction

In the higher education context, there has been considerable amount of research regarding feedback and its significance to students' learning. Feedback is a crucial element of effective teaching and learning (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010a). Furthermore, research offers data that feedback contributes to students' achievement as well as to facilitate students' growth as autonomous learners (Ferguson, 2011). Thus, feedback is regarded as a key element of assessment strategies in higher education (Evans, 2013). Moreover, feedback has been acknowledged to evaluative and educative functions (Pitt & Norton, 2016). In terms of evaluation, feedback gives students information about their performance efforts on assessment tasks. In this sense, students consider feedback on their tasks is important in identifying their strengths and weaknesses, increasing motivation, and increasing their value in the future (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017). From an educational perspective, quality feedback has a major influence in improving students' work (Al Hajri & Al-Mahrooqi, 2013; Gul, Tharani, Lakhani, Rizvi, & Ali, 2016) as well as in meeting students' expectations (Pitt & Norton, 2016). Feedback produces a significant impact on the quality of student learning experiences. The positive impact of feedback is influenced by several factors, including student preferences for the type of feedback and its effectiveness and opportunities to communicate/dialogue with lecturers, as Pitt and Norton (2017) said that feedback is a process of communication and dialogue that occurs in specific social contexts.

Feedback related research in recent years has looked into different features of feedback practices in different settings. Studies were conducted in an attempt to seek effective ways to support students to improve their learning through feedback in their specific context. Several studies investigated students' perceptions of feedback they received, including what constitutes effective feedback and their preferences for feedback. Common shared perceptions is that effective feedback should be personal (Chang et al., 2012; Dawson et al., 2019; Ferguson, 2011) detailed (Budge, 2011), legible (Ferguson, 2011; Price et al., 2010), timely (Bayerlein, 2014; Dawson et al., 2019; Murphy & Cornell, 2010; Wilson et al., 2014). Effective feedback should also involve dialogic feedback with the instructors (Pitt & Norton, 2016; Yang & Carless, 2013) and facilitate students to move forward (Mulliner & Tucker, 2015; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). In terms of preferences, studies reported students' preferences for written (Budge, 2011; Sprague, 2017), a combination of written and face to face (Dawson et al., 2019; Murphy & Cornell, 2010), and both positive and negative feedback (Ntuli, September, & Sithole, 2018; Pitt & Norton, 2016; Plakht, Shiyovich, Nusbaum, & Raizer, 2013). Specific to the EFL context, the majority of studies explored students' preferences for feedback in relation to specific language skills. For example, there were studies on oral corrective feedback (Atma & Widiati, 2015; Motlagh, 2015; Tasdemir & Arslan, 2018), and specific studies about feedback on writing (Kamberi, 2013; Ruegg, 2015).

However, although studies have revealed the benefits of feedback and highlighted perceptions of what constitutes effective feedback and students' preference for feedback, there are also evident that students are dissatisfied with feedback they receive (Price et al., 2010). This dissatisfaction may arise from the divergence between students' expectations and feedback practice (Li & De Luca, 2014). For example, students found that the feedback was unclear (Price et al., 2010a), untimely feedback (Scaife & Wellington, 2010), and less specific (Ferguson, 2011). Consequently, students reported that feedback they received does not have much effect on improving their learning (Bailey & Garner, 2010). Thus, there is a need to explore how students feel and think about the feedback they receive, including what types of feedback they prefer and find useful (Pitt & Norton, 2017). As Mulliner and Tucker (2015) affirms that students should be given the opportunity to say what they think about feedback and provide feedback to assist teachers in delivering effective feedback.

What the literature suggests is that understanding feedback practices, especially from the perspective of students becomes very important because the benefits of feedback depend on how students perceive the feedback (Price et al., 2010a). Thus, research that focuses on student perspectives in the context of higher education remains significant and necessary (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017). Furthermore inquiries into feedback practices in different contexts are encouraged as an assessment is context specific (Willis, Adie, & Klenowski, 2013). Accordingly, this paper attends a gap in our understanding around what postgraduate EFL students' preferences for feedback and the reasons behind their preferences through qualitative content analysis from semi-structured interviews. As Vattøy and Smith (2019) affirmed that "More qualitative and mixed-method studies are needed to gain a more detailed understanding of the mechanisms of feedback processes, self-regulation, and self-efficacy in foreign- language teaching" (p. 267). In particular, this paper addresses the following research question: "What are postgraduate EFL students' preferences for feedback?"

### **Literature Review**

Within the feedback literature, it is widely acknowledged that feedback is a key factor in classroom assessment because learning occurs through the use of feedback (Gamlem & Smith, 2013; Murphy & Cornell, 2010a). The role of feedback in supporting student learning has been well documented by researchers (e.g., Blair & McGinty, 2013; Mulliner & Tucker, 2015; Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010). Feedback plays a crucial role in helping students identify the gap between existing and targeted achievement (Ferguson, 2011). Furthermore, feedback also promotes student autonomy; in that effective feedbacks not only develops students' knowledge but also fosters students' capacity to take responsibility for improving learning (Andrade & Heritage, 2018). Hence, students need to be able to make meaning and use the feedback they receive to make the most of the feedback.

The impact of feedback on learning is influenced by several factors, including the time and mode of feedback delivery. Studies revealed that how and when teachers give feedback affect students' use of feedback (Pitt & Norton, 2016; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010).

However, other studies argue that when and how students receive feedback are the significant contributing factors to students' understanding and application of feedback (Hattie & Gan, 2011). Similarly, Gamlem and Smith (2013) contented that the recipient of the feedback is the student; and how they use feedback will ultimately determine its effects on learning.

A considerable amount of studies on feedback has focused on exploring students as the recipient of feedback, perceive teachers' feedback practices. Studies revealed that in general, students are critical about their feedback experiences (Dawson et al., 2019; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). For example, students expressed that timely feedback is something they desire but not always received (Murphy & Cornell, 2010a; Wilson et al., 2014). Students and preferred certain types of feedback that suit their needs (Cavanaugh & Song, 2014; Francis, Millington, & Cederlöf, 2019; Sprague, 2017). Other studies investigate the differences between student and teacher perceptions and preferences for feedback. When students and lecturers' perceptions were compared, nonetheless, studies revealed that they do not essentially have a similar view of useful feedback practice (Dawson et al., 2019; Mulliner & Tucker, 2015). These studies indicate that students are aware of the aspects that influence their learning and that teachers need to be considerate of students' views. Hence, it is important to gain a better understanding of student perspectives of the feedback they receive. As Dawson's et al. (2019) argues that students are active players in the feedback process; therefore understanding students' view of the purpose, the effectiveness of feedback and how they use feedback are essential for successful implementation of feedback.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research design, participants, and locale of the study***

This study employed a qualitative research design, which relied on the case study approach. This approach allowed us to investigate postgraduate EFL students' preferences for feedback in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Final year (third and fourth semester) postgraduate students in an English program were invited to participate in the study. The invitation and the information about the purpose of the study were sent through students' messenger groups. Ten students consented to participate. There were six students from semester three and four students from semester four (aged between 24 and 35 years).

### ***Data collection and analysis, and establishment of trustworthiness***

Semi-structured interviews were used to enable us to explore in-depth the topic under study as Given (2008) argues that a semi-structured interview allows participants to elaborate their perceptions or experiences and facilitates researchers to seek more information. The interview questions primarily explored students' preferences for feedback and why they prefer to receive such feedbacks. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. To ensure the

trustworthiness of the study, researchers consulted with participants regarding the accuracy of the interview transcripts (Given, 2008).

The data from the interview were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis aligned with the recommendations of Cho and Lee (2014). Following Cho and Lee' (2014) inductive approach to qualitative analysis, we started open coding by reading and rereading interview transcripts to establish tentative codes. Similar codes were then grouped into categories. The categories were checked for consistency and revised when necessary. We then identified themes based on the categories. This process enabled us to articulate ideas with regard to what the interview data meant and to see the cohesion between participants' feedback preferences.

### ***Ethical considerations***

All efforts were taken to address ethical concerns. Participants were made aware of the ethical issues regarding their participation in the study. Participants signed a consent form indicating their willingness to participate and permission to publish findings. Participants were informed that their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw their participation at any time. The interview session was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. All transcripts and research records are kept confidential including the anonymity of participants in the published article.

### **Findings**

The findings describe the perceptions of postgraduate EFL students on feedback preferences and examine the reasons behind their preferences. Quotes from participants have been used to exemplify common perceptions. Nonetheless, infrequent perspectives are included and also recognized as such. The emerging themes from the findings are presented below.

### ***Written and verbal feedback***

Findings revealed that most students preferred written feedback for various reasons. Students found lecturers tend to give more detailed comments in written feedback as expressed by a student, "I prefer a type of format in the form of written feedback as lecturers usually give a detailed explanation so that I know what to do next." Another student preferred written feedback as it was more personal and gave them the motivation to do better as one student said, "I prefer written comments as it is personal. It shows that lecturers appreciate your efforts. And this makes me feel more motivated to perform better". Moreover, the preference for written feedback seemed to be also influenced by students' learning styles. "I'm a more visual type of person, so I prefer to receive written feedback." Written feedback was also found to be beneficial as it shows in detail what needs to be

corrected or improved. “I would prefer written feedback as it helps me to trace where my mistakes are in my paper, especially in a writing course.”

However, one student preferred to receive verbal feedback as written feedback was sometimes unclear.

“I must say I prefer verbal feedback than written feedback. Written feedback sometimes is too vague. I find a face to face feedback most helpful because I can confirm my understanding of lecturers’ feedback. For example, I can ask why I got 78 and what I need to improve.”

The combination of written and verbal feedback, nonetheless, was preferred by two students. These students referred to receive written comments followed by verbal feedback to allow them to clarify directly lecturers’ feedback intention and expectation. One student argued,

“I personally prefer to have written comments followed by face to face oral feedback as I sometimes cannot understand what my lecturer wrote in written comments. I need to have oral feedback so that I can confirm my understanding of his feedback and ask questions related to my assignments.”

Similarly, another student asserted, “There are times when I do not know what lecturers’ mean in the written comments. So, I also need verbal feedback so that I know what to improve.” Although majority of students preferred written feedback, some students were concern of the legibility of handwritten feedback. Participants found lecturers’ handwriting was illegible, thus making it harder to read and understand the lecturers’ feedback as commented by some students, “Some lecturers have illegible handwriting. It was just difficult to read. I didn’t know what to act on”. “It was an effort by itself to try to understand some lecturers’ written comments. There were times when I had to contact a lecturer to help me read what was written.”

### ***General and specific feedback***

Specific feedback was the preferred feedback over the general one. The most cited reason for the preference was that specific feedback enabled students to know what to act on. As one student affirmed,

“I would prefer formats that are more personally aimed at my specific work since they will give me more detailed information that I needed to re-evaluate my task. It is easier for me to know which of my works that should be fixed and in what areas it needs to be corrected.”

Another student contended, “When the comments are general like “great”, “pay attention to grammar”, “needs improvement”, they give little benefits”. “I would prefer specific feedback with examples so that I can meet lecturers’ expectation”. The benefits of specific feedback are also true when it comes to courses related to English language skills such as writing. One

student said, "I like it when I receive specific corrections on my grammar from my lecturers. Especially in courses like writing courses". However, for general courses, one student said, "Feedback on grammar or choices of vocabulary in my paper would be too detailed and has little benefit for me."

### ***Grade and feedback comments***

Another theme that emerged from the findings was about grade and feedback comments. Most students expressed their preference to have a combination of both formats. "I myself learn more from comments than from grades. However, I would welcome both grade and comments as they motivate me in different ways". One student explained how both feedback formats influence him, "I prefer both formats (grades and comments). While grades give me a sense of achievement, I also need an explanation of the mistakes I made in my assignments". Another student asserted, "Good grades give me positive energy, but I want to know why I did well or not well. In this case, comments, especially written comments, will help me understand my strengths and weaknesses". Nonetheless, one student commented that she preferred comments over grades as grades do not reflect students' actual competence. "Sometimes the feedback I received was only in a form of the grade. A grade does not tell you anything about what I'm capable of or not capable of doing. I would prefer comments type of feedback".

### ***Feedback turnaround time***

Another theme that emerged was the timeliness of feedback. Students have a variety of opinions on this matter. In general, the expected turnaround time ranging from three days to a maximum of two weeks, depending on the form of assignments given. As some students said: "In my opinion, it depends on what assignment is given. If the assignment is in the form of project, I would not expect to receive feedback in two days." "The faster the task is returned, the better. But it depends on the level of difficulty of the task. If the task is complex and requires accuracy, surely the time needed to assess and provide feedback will be more". Another student stated that feedback must have been given before students work on their next assignment so they could do their next assignment better. "I hope to receive feedback as soon as possible, at least before the next assignment is given". Another thing revealed in this study is that students do not mind waiting for lecturer feedback in the hope of getting quality and useful feedback. "I have no problem with how fast I can get feedback. I understand that lecturers are busy, and the more students, the more time is needed for lecturers to read student assignments and provide quality feedback."

### ***Positive and negative feedback***

Furthermore, students commented about positive and negative feedback and how they influenced confidence and motivation. Typical comments included: "I prefer to receive both types of feedback. Positive feedback shows my strengths thus gives me confidence.

Negative feedback shows my weaknesses and motivates to do better in the next task”. “Negative feedback has to be balanced with positive feedback. Negative feedback tells me what to improve. Positive feedback makes me feel motivated as I feel that lecturers do not only focus on what I did wrong in an assignment”. Another student contended, “Positive only feedback doesn’t make me learn; negative only feedback, demotivated me. So students should receive both”. Nonetheless, one student pointed out the importance of constructive feedback. “Both positive and negative must be constructive, specific, and show how I can improve my works.”

### ***Effective feedback***

During interviews, students also offered their view of effective feedback. Several characteristics of effective feedback shared by students related to their feedback preferences mentioned in previous sections. Common views included: “Effective feedback should be based on clear criteria, and include specific suggestions”. “Clear purpose, clear criteria, and easy to understand. That’s what I call effective feedback”. Mode of feedback delivery was also mentioned as an attribute of effective feedback. “Feedback is effective when it is given regularly in a timely manner”. It was also argued that feedback should include multiple formats in order to be effective. “Feedback should be given in various formats; written and verbal, grade and comments, positive and negative so that it will suit students’ different needs”. Nevertheless, one student contended that effective feedback should be done in a cycle. “A feedback would be effective if students are given the opportunity to revise then resubmit. Students submitted an assignment and receive feedback. Then students revise and resubmit and give final feedback.”

### **Discussion**

The present article aimed at investigating EFL postgraduate students’ preference for feedback and the reasons behind their preferences. Students’ feedback preferences identified in this study fall into several categories, i.e., written and verbal feedback, general and specific feedback, grades and feedback comments, positive and negative feedback, and feedback timeliness. Students’ perceptions of preferences documented in this study are expected and acknowledged in the literature. Students’ preference for written feedback supports previous studies in that it is more personal and encourages them to do better (Budge, 2011; Sprague, 2017). Students in this study also sense that lecturers tend to grant more detailed comments in written feedback. These notions are consistent with a study by Chang et al. (2012) that students appreciate lecturers taking time to read their assignments and give detailed feedback, and this motivated them to make revision of their assignments. It is interesting to note that findings revealed students’ preferences for a certain type of feedback relates to students’ learning style. As one student in this study who identified herself as a visual learner would prefer to receive written than verbal feedback. This finding confirms Sprague's (2017) research that there is a direct relationship between learning styles and students’ learning styles. Sprague further argues that students perform best when receiving feedbacks that

correspond to their identified learning styles. However, this finding contradicts with that of Tasdemir and Arslan (2018) who stated that learning styles do not correspond with students' feedback preferences. Thus, studies concerning the correlation between learning styles and feedback preferences seem inconclusive and need further investigation.

However, students raised concerns about the legibility of handwritten feedback. This finding is in line with previous studies that found that students had difficulties reading handwritten feedbacks as they were illegible (Ferguson, 2011; Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010). As a consequence, students were unable to use lecturers' input to improve their work. This finding indicates that written feedback is useful when it is clear and meaningful. Despite students' preferences for written feedback, several students would welcome the combination of both written and face to face verbal feedback to check their understanding of feedback. This finding is similar to the results of a study by Chang et al. (2012) that interactive face-to-face communication will help eliminate student concerns and provide clarity on the feedback given. Likewise, Pitt & Norton (2016) argue that verbal feedback allows students to clarify and avoid mistakes in understanding and interpreting the feedback received. This finding hence suggests that students would embrace the opportunity to have dialogic communication with lecturers to discuss the feedback.

In terms of feedback content, students were clear that they want detailed feedback. This finding supports previous studies such as those of Budge (2011) and Price et al. (2010). This finding may be especially true considering students' backgrounds as EFL learners. Detailed feedback such as correction on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary choices was found useful. Students also appear to look for explicit comments including some examples about how to improve their work. This signifies that students care about their learning and want to do better in the future (Ferguson, 2011; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). Hence this finding explains students' preference to receive feedback comments than grade only feedback as detailed comments facilitate students to move forward. Grade and justification of the grade, on the other hand, were viewed to have no impact on students' improvement (Price et al., 2010). Giving both grade and feedback comments can optimize the impact of feedback.

However, the full range of students in this study see feedback not only in terms of content but also concerning its impacts on students' emotional being. Students felt that positive feedback encourage them to perform better while negative feedback provokes them to give up, as findings in previous studies revealed that negative feedback could cause demotivation and frustration (Li & De Luca, 2014; Ntuli et al., 2018). Recognizing the value of both feedbacks, students in this study expressed that they want to receive a balance between positive and negative feedback. This finding corroborates with that of Pitt and Norton's (2017) who found in their research that feedback would be more valuable if it contained both comments that are positive and negative because positive comments would raise the possibility of students to accept negative comments well and not decreasing their motivation. However, students were clear that feedback whether positive or negative should be constructive and meaningful. This finding denotes that quality feedback influence students' feedback reception, as previous studies revealed that the quality and accuracy of

feedback would influence students acceptance of even negative feedback (Ntuli et al., 2018; Plakht et al., 2013).

Despite the spectrum of views on the timeframe for feedback, there was an agreement amongst students in this study that feedback timeliness is important in order for it to be useful. The importance of timely feedback has long been acknowledged. This finding echoes previous studies that if the feedback is returned to students rather late and if students have moved to the next task or task, feedback will be of no use for student learning (Bayerlein, 2014; Dawson et al., 2019; Murphy & Cornell, 2010). Nevertheless, students are aware that timeliness does not equal quality. Thus, students do not mind waiting for the lecturer's feedback in the hope of getting quality and useful feedback. This finding confirms Ferguson's study (2011) that if students expect to receive quality feedback, they are willing to wait a little longer. One student even said that it does not matter how long she has to wait for a lecturer to give feedback as long as she received a feedback. This finding is in line with research conducted by Chang et al. (2012) that students basically expect to receive feedback to help them to improve.

Students' feedback preferences have shaped students' view of what constitutes effective feedback. Features such as clarity, regularity, tone, and timing were mentioned by students as indicators effective feedback. Most importantly is that feedback becomes effective when it is used by students to improve their learning. As feedback is considered as ineffective if students do not do anything about the feedback they receive (Price et al., 2010). Hence, to support students to use the feedback, a dialog between student and lecturer becomes significant. The finding of this study suggests that an effective feedback process should be carried out in a cyclical way. This cyclical approach enables students to take action on the feedback by revising and resubmitting the tasks and then getting a final feedback. Thus, the importance of students' engagement has been recognized in previous studies in that students desire to engage in the feedback process and that communication with their instructor is a critical component to effective feedback (Chang et al., 2012; Mulliner & Tucker, 2015).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Literature underlines the importance of feedback to students' learning, and the necessity to listen to students' perceptions of feedback has also been recognized. Our findings echoed previous studies but this study aimed at contributing to the literature by presenting feedback preferences of postgraduate students in an EFL context through a qualitative study. The findings of this study provides nuance to help us to further understand how students perceive feedback and what are their preference so that a better feedback processed can be undertaken in a specific context. The findings highlight that majority of postgraduate EFL students in this study preferred written, specific, detailed, regular, constructive, and timely feedback for future improvement. Students are not only interested in a grade but also a meaningful feedback to make them move forward. Students showed interest in feedback they receive and desire to have discussion with lecturers about the

feedback. This finding emphasizes the need for a dialogic feedback where students and lecturers can share understanding of what feedback is and improve the way feedback process is done.

The implication of this study is that it may provide some guidance for lecturers to design or refocus their feedback practice by considering students' preferences and expectations. Although one might question whether what students preferred is the most effective feedback. Nonetheless, understanding students' preferences are part of the efforts to give students the best feedback experiences. Furthermore, findings on students' feedback preferences, such as the findings of this study, may also serve as a consideration in designing a teachers' training in assessment. As Zulaiha, Mulyono, and Ambarsari (2020) argue that teachers should have the necessary assessment knowledge and skills including skills in giving feedback to enable them to deliver quality assessment. However, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. This study was only focused on postgraduate EFL students' feedback preferences. It is based on a small number of students from the same program within one institution. Thus, students' perceptions and preferences for feedback are context-specific and depending on students' level of feedback experiences. Nonetheless, the study provides insight into students' preferences and why they prefer particular feedback.

#### **Disclosure statement**

There is no conflict of interest reported by the authors.

#### **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank all participants who participated in this study. Also we would like to thank IRJE and reviewers for accepting our article.

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