

# The Effect of Student Receptivity to Instructional Feedback on Writing Proficiency among Chinese Speaking English Language Learners

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research study is to discover the degree to which student acceptance of instructor feedback influences developing writing proficiency among Chinese speaking English Language Learners enrolled in an American middle school. This study was designed as a qualitative case study—an approach using in-depth inductive processes to observe and evaluate the receptivity of eighth-grade students to instructor feedback during an extended unit of instruction covering the five-paragraph essay model.

The principal results in this study show that students who receive timely feedback and are receptive to this feedback become proficient writers, able to pass a Writing Multiple Measurement Assessment (WMMA), contrary to those who are not receptive to feedback.

The author reviews research regarding the importance of structured writing instruction for English Language Learners and tactics writing instructors should consider to strategically provide heeded feedback. This study also recommends practical applications for future research direction.

**Keywords:** ESL, English Language Learner (ELL) writing teacher, Effective feedback practice, An in-depth inductive approach, Qualitative case study, Five-paragraph essay, Structural writing, Chinese Mandarin speaker

## 1. Introduction: Student Perceptions and Instructor's Feedback

Writing instruction can be an extremely painful task for students and instructor, if an appropriate learning environment for optimal performance is not in place. An appropriate learning environment must include practical, research-based teaching strategies. This is because writing can expose a student's academic vulnerabilities as no other process-based student activity can (Elbow, 2002). Hunt and Hunt (2004) believe that an effective way of engaging students in writing is to enable them to view this ability as an immediate, responsive mode of communication (Daniels, 2005; Ball and Jarr, 2003). As Macaro says, "Feedback is to a learner what the ballet is to a ballerina" (2003).

### 1.1 The Overarching Research Question

How does a middle school ELL (English Language Learner) student's reaction to instructor feedback effect individual writing proficiency?

### 1.2 The Purpose of the Study: To Fill a Research Gap

Although there is a great deal of research on writing instruction feedback strategies, little is written about the use of feedback when teaching the five-paragraph essay (FPE). There is an even greater gap in the research literature on teaching writing to English Language Learners--particularly, Chinese middle school-aged ELL students. Little is known about their reaction to an instructor's feedback in the process of teaching the FPE. My intention with this study is to help fill this gap in the research by presenting observations that can produce effective feedback practices to improve motivation among English learners.

### 1.3 Overview of the Study's Basic Elements

Of course, educators need to prudently find ways to give appropriate feedback. Notably, the effect of a teacher's

reactions, beliefs and feedback on student writing drafts has generated a heated debate (Macaro, 2003). Yet, ultimately, the support ELLs receive along the way matter most. Individual studies by researchers Ferris (2002), Semke (1982), and Kreizman (as cited in Macaro, 2003) all propose essential strategies for feedback within three different aspects. These strategies focus on the ways in which feedback can be presented: direct versus indirect feedback, the content of feedback, and the time frame when feedback is offered (or timely feedback).

This current study used an in-depth, inductive approach to design a qualitative case study of four Chinese-speaking middle school ELLs and their responses to their English teacher's feedback. The specific subject of instruction was the FPE format.

## 2. Literature Review

Research investigating the use of the five-paragraph essay structure for writing instruction does often view this instructional tool as a structured way for ELLs to organize their thinking. Otherwise, sans form, writing can be like an unbridled horse. Wray and Lewis (1997) encourage the use of a "strategic outline" to scaffold writing in a specific context. They likened the method to a novice computer software user applying a given template to initiate their work. The structured support provides a vehicle for ELLs to organize their thinking.

Warwick and Maloch (2003) disclose that a standard writing framework is helpful in the beginning stage of "scaffolding learning." Although, they do not account for the variety of written forms and genres ELLs will be exposed to, it is suggested that only until students are able to internally process the structure and work firsthand on a particular type of writing, can they then dispense with these techniques (Mercer, 2000).

In their research, Warwick and Maloch (2003) do acknowledge opposing views to "formulaic imposed techniques." For the most part, opposing views assert that an overly mechanical instructional approach can stifle the development of a student's "reflective process," limiting the "internalization of understanding" and restraining the growth of "metacognitive skills." In other words, students can "feel constrained by formalized scaffolding tools."

### 2.1 The Five-Paragraph Essay (FPE)

The advantage of students in following the five-paragraph (FPE) model is connected to achieving high scores on the SAT and other familiar standardized writing tests. Broader applications include test-taking strategies that support the efforts of prospective teachers (among them, native-Chinese language speakers) trying to pass the writing section of the CBEST (California Basic Educational Skills Test). The relevance of test-taking strategies also applies to non-native English speaking students seeking to pass the writing portion of their TOEFL, TOEIC, GEPT, and GRE exams. In other words, the FPE is relevant to undergraduate and graduate students who desire to further their degree, study abroad or find a better job. Being able to implement the principles of the FPE in order to form a strongly organized piece of writing is beneficial to non-native English speaking students.

The College Board Essay evaluators favor the FPE style of writing (Smith, 2006; Perelman, 2005). Smith claims, "Almost without exception, students who intimately know the FPE are more prepared to take on the challenge of college-level writing" (Smith, 2006, p. 16). Furthermore, Breland, Kubota, and Bonner (1999) have shown that student performance on the SAT II Single-Subject test in writing, which requires at least a basic understanding of the FPE model, accurately predicts a college freshman's first year grade point average.

#### 2.1.1 Strengths of the FPE Model

The five-paragraph structure represents a refined conventional format for compositions, and is the most widely taught structure across secondary schools and college composition programs. Actually, this rigid structure can be traced back to 16th century French philosopher Petrus Ramus (Johnson, Smagorinsky, Thomson, and Fry, 2003).

The likely source of the FPE structure's popularity is its pervasive use in textbooks, leading the general public to believe that it is likewise a most effective instructional format (Johnson, Smagorinsky, Thompson, and Fry, 2003). In practice, the structure requires an introduction, three body-paragraphs, and a conclusion. It is easy to design and teach. Moreover, teachers who employ it as a method see quick improvement in student writing outcomes (Hillocks, 1995).

Accordingly, the FPE is now a leading prototype for standardized testing (Wesley, 2000). To illustrate, Hillocks (2002) found that the statewide secondary writing assessment in Illinois uses a rubric based on the FPE model, including an introduction, three supporting paragraphs, and one conclusion. Despite the state writing test never specifically referring to the essay component of the assessment as an FPE, the essential components of the model are apparent. Due to the short time span to complete the tests, the format provides a structured guideline most students can follow for easier completion of the writing task. Insufficient, poorly written content would not

jeopardize the students' grades but instead reward them for following the FPE formula. Tindal and Haladyna (2002) conclude that the FPE is a strategic writing method, effective in increasing students' statewide standardized writing test scores.

Dean (2000) states that "form-oriented writing," such as the FPE, provides students with a framework through which to form and elaborate their ideas. Therefore, one might easily conclude that the FPE can actually be viewed as a collection of choices allowing users additional options.

### 2.1.2 Weaknesses of the FPE Model

Solely focusing on instructional form, the FPE structure is seen as lacking an important feature: social interaction (Johnson et al, 2003). Using a tool that emphasizes the expression of ideas and communication, and features social interaction is what constitutes the ability to dialogue (to respond swiftly) between anticipated readers and the writer. Johnson and co-researchers (2003) believe that when dialogue is integrated in the five-paragraph format, it can then be used as a real tool to socialize students via statewide large-scale assessments.

Hillocks' (2002) study criticized the FPE form for restricting writing to focus only on production. In 2003, he denounced the FPE for taking very little account of thoughtful development. He added that one could just follow the formula without much in-depth thinking and receive a very decent grade (Hillocks, 2003). Johnson, Smagorinsky, Thomson, and Fry (2003) also argue that the FPE model limits student thinking and choices.

### 2.2 Comparative Structural Writing Studies with English as Second Language Learners

Gomez's empirical research (1996) showed the importance of structural writing on students in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. During a standardized test probe, forty-eight low-achieving Hispanic students with limited English proficiency were randomly assigned to write essays using one of two writing forms, either structured or free writing. Students were allowed to choose to write in Spanish or English. The Free Writing Group (FWG) could write for as long as they wanted, and could assist one another, adding an element of social interaction (using Lev Vygotsky's *Social Development Theory*). In the study's theoretical stages, Gomez favored this free writing approach.

The Structural Writing Group (SWG), on the other hand, had very strict guidelines. The instructor assigned a topic and the students were to quietly work on their paper alone. Writing was closely monitored to make sure errors were corrected, and to prevent habitual mistakes.

Instructors and teacher assistants responsible for each group received a "fidelity implementation check" and a "fidelity implementation evaluation score" from researchers to ensure the correct treatment for each group. When assessing their papers, the trained evaluators mainly analyzed five areas of writing: organization, topic and logical development, mechanics, overall meaning and sentence construction.

Contrary to the researcher's expectations, the result of the findings revealed that the SWG showed a steady improvement over time, while the FWG showed a general decline in writing. Ironically, the SWG showed some weakness in organization; while, the FWG showed that their only strength was in the area of overall meaning.

This research revealed an important observation: theory-based common wisdom regarding general writing instruction might not necessarily apply to second language learners. For example, teacher-assigned writing topics and teacher monitored error corrections were not encouraged during writing instruction sessions for native-English speakers, but the same worked well with ELL populations. In this regard, it would be well-advised for researchers evaluating the field of ESL instruction to compare the effectiveness of all general knowledge applied to native-English speakers with principles applied to ELL populations (Gomez, 1996).

Instructional techniques that work with general native-English speakers may need to be revisited in order to determine effectiveness among ELL populations (Gomez, 1996). For example, research (Gomez, 1996) has indicated that structural writing does not work to help native-English speakers develop a pronounced writing fluidity. With ELLs, the contrary is true. ELL students like the structured writing format and work more productively within it.

Overall, in terms of feedback provided by writing instructors, researchers have explored a variety of perspectives regarding the effectiveness and relevance of feedback to student success. Among them, researchers have examined different forms of feedback, using student surveys to determine student preferences. Likewise, researchers have also closely examined specific elements of feedback in order to encourage more enthusiastic writing, and introduce strategic ways to effectively provide heeded feedback.

### 2.3 *The Benefits and Disadvantages of Direct Feedback*

Ferris (2002) states that direct or explicit feedback leads to an immediate and more accurate revision over a period of one semester. However, with direct feedback, answers in the form of corrections are given to students. Therefore, they do not need to exercise memory skills through a process of trial and error through draft writing (Ferris, 2002). In this regard, students most likely store their knowledge of writing techniques in just their short-term memory (Ormrod, 2011), which they can easily retrieve in the short term, but soon forget in the long run.

Frantzen's study (as cited in Ferris, 2002) showed that a student's writing performance responded better to indirect (or implicit) feedback than direct feedback over a longer time span. In other words, their accuracy improved and errors were reduced far better than with direct feedback. Students in the indirect feedback sample were able to experiment with sentences and used a trial-and-error method. They had the opportunity to actively think through the logistics. Therefore, those students had on-the-spot training along with some practice. Hence, new knowledge was stored in both their working and long-term memory (Ormrod, 2011).

Semke (1982) focused on the content of feedback, leading to results that raised a significant issue. Which elements of feedback could motivate students to write more? She studied 141 university students (English L1) enrolled in a German as a foreign language class. She divided her students into four groups:

Group A: Teacher gives feedback only on content, no error is suggested.

Group B: Teacher gives feedback on both content and error.

Group C: Teacher gives implicit feedback by coding the error and asking students to correct them.

Group D: Teacher gives error feedback only.

The results revealed that although all four groups had drafted an equal number of errors, Group A had written the most elaborate and extensive essays with no significant errors. This study suggests that writing instructors should provide minimum error feedback, but focus feedback on that content which encourages prolific writing.

### 2.4 *Strategically Coordinated Feedback*

Kreizman's study (as cited in Macaro, 2003) concerned feedback given at the appropriate time. It found that when students received feedback from their teacher, they were most concerned about their grades and only superficially acknowledged their teacher's written feedback. Likewise, Williams (2003) and Samway (1993) suggest that a teacher's on-the-spot correction would likely result in short-term retention of that specific instruction. Ultimately, students would forget over a longer period of time. Instead, giving students formative feedback with strategies for improvement through one-on-one student-teacher conferences in the intermediate stages of the writing process would enhance accuracy and quality of writing (Ferris, 2002; Freizman's study as cited in Macaro, 2003). This kind of strategic timing would help students better focus their attention on the teacher's suggestions.

## 3. **Methodology: A Case Study Approach**

This study was constructed around a qualitative case study approach in order to facilitate an in-depth analysis of four middle-school Chinese ELLs in an English writing class. The students were enrolled in ELD (English Language Development) Level-Four, at the time of the study. This age group has probably been learning the FPE model since the fifth grade. In California, the five-paragraph essay is introduced in the 5th grade as seen in the CA Language Arts standards- writing standard 1.1, Create Multiple-paragraph narrative compositions and 1.2, Create Multiple-paragraph expository compositions (California Department of Education, 2006) though students may have learned it early in middle school, ELL students are the focus of this study, because there is an ongoing need to strengthen ELLs command of the FPE structure. Therefore, to best prepare students for the type of writing that will help them be successful in future writing tasks and assessments, it will be necessary to provide a solid foundation in the writing of a five-paragraph essay in middle school. This study sought to investigate how the students would perceive their teacher's feedback as they continued the process of mastering this writing format.

Various methods to collect data (Stake, 2006) were utilized. Some of the methods used included sample selection and data collection, which are briefly described in this review. Of course, this case study is confined within time and activity. So, a discussion of the findings and suggestions for instructional practices and future research are presented with that in mind.

### *3.1 Sampling Strategies*

Time period sampling (Patton, 2008) was one type of sampling procedure used. Individual writing is a process, and requires continuous and ongoing observation. These students practiced this approach everyday for two weeks and their progress was tracked for a set time of three months. This illustrates Patton's (2008) assertion that time sampling is a crucial approach because programs function differently at different times and at different stages during the year.

### *3.2 Data Collection Procedures*

Three methods of data collection were incorporated into this study to triangulate the findings: interview, observation, and document analysis. Most importantly, multiple case studies regarding the middle school ELL participants were used to organize and report the data.

### *3.3 Document and Records Analysis*

Document and records analysis were also used to provide background information. These included the writing section of the seventh-grade level English Language Development Test (CELDT). In addition, results were gathered from the Multiple Measurement Assessment (MMA) writing exam, classroom writing samples, and background information found in their cumulative classroom folders.

In particular, the CELDT is designed to assess and measure the four core skills categorized under language arts: listening, speaking, reading and writing. It identifies what ELD level a student has reached in each of these areas along five levels. The test is given in October and campus administrators used the results as one of the measures to help determine appropriate placement of the ELD students. The four students who participated in the study were classified as ELD Level Four.

Ironically, these results did not indicate any specific student writing abilities in the newer language, English. Instead, at that time, the school used the writing portion of the MMA to determine students' writing proficiency, when coupled with the CELDT results.

The classroom teacher who participated in this study had an instructional process that included collecting student writing samples in portfolios throughout the academic year. In terms of this study, these same writing samples and others were analyzed from four perspectives. First, the researcher looked at whether students adhered to the teacher's recommendations and hence made suggested improvements. Second, students' writing samples not included in their folders were also reviewed and analyzed. Third, all writing tests administered during the months of January and February, and students' homework samples were reviewed to provide comparative sampling. Finally, students' writing samples were specifically analyzed to determine individual progress in mastering the FPE structure.

### *3.4 Data Analysis and Procedures*

An inductive approach to data analysis was used to determine research findings. Accordingly, interview questions were not constrained to "predetermined categories" (Patton, 2008). The result allowed for further probing for greater depth in observations. Actually, most of the interviewing and observation sessions were used to qualitatively explore the students' reactions to their instructor's feedback. Therefore, clarification was elicited frequently on observed practices, and behaviors. An in-depth analysis was conducted of documents, interviews and observations to provide greater detail and generate new insights into the program (Patton, 2008). Ultimately, this observational approach required that the researcher exercised great openness and flexibility through the duration of the study.

### *3.5 Introduction of the Participants*

The two objectives through the interviews were to (1) discover the format in which students liked to receive feedback, and (2) discover whether students were receptive or open to any feedback from the instructor. An initial twenty-minute interview was conducted with each of the individual students. The researcher eventually selected the following students to participate in the study: Stephen, Chloe, Fong and Iwen. They were all enrolled in Harmony Middle School.

#### *3.5.1 Overview of the School*

Harmony Middle School (HMS) is a large urban school serving a diverse student population. At HMS, fifty-three teachers are fully credentialed (96.4%) and two university interns (3.6%) assist. Of the 1,212 students enrolled at HMS, 398 (32.8%) are English learners, 433 (35.7%) Fluent English Proficient (FEP) students, and 45 (11.4%) students had been redesignated FEP (California Department of Education 2006). Among HMS' eighth graders, there were a total of 121 English learners who spoke a variety of languages. The primary

languages (and speakers) represented in the ELD program at the time of this study included the following: Spanish (53), Cantonese (33) Mandarin (14), Vietnamese (13), Filipino (2), Arabic (1), Indonesian (2), Thai (1), and Italian (1). There was one other student whose primary language was not ascertained at that time.

### 3.5.2 Overview of the School's Performance on California Standards Test (2006)

A little over half (53.5% ) of the HMS student population had scored at or above proficiency on the Language Arts portion of the California Standards Test (CST). All subgroups met statewide targets on the CST in English/Language Arts (California Department of Education, 2006).

There were a total of 9 eighth-grade Mandarin-speaking students in HMS's ELD program, as well. At the top levels of the program, two students (22%) were in the advanced program, while three (33%) were enrolled in the early-advanced category. In the lower levels, one student (11%) was enrolled in the intermediate class, and one other student (11%), in the early-intermediate level. Rounding out the program, were two students (22%) who comprised the beginning level. Five (56%) Mandarin speakers in HMS met the State Board of Education criteria for English proficiency. Among the 43 eighth-grade Cantonese speakers, twenty-seven (63%) were placed in the advanced category, eleven (26%) in the early-advanced, and five (12%) in the intermediate level programs. None of the Cantonese speakers were enrolled in the early intermediate or beginning groups. Thirty-eight Cantonese students in HMS met the State Board of Education criteria for English proficiency. At HMS, 53.5% of students demonstrated proficiency in English Language Acquisition (ELA) standards.

### 3.5.3 Overview of the Participating Classroom

The study was conducted in Mrs. Ha's eighth-grade ELD Level Four class. The majority of the ELL class was composed of Hispanic students, with the second largest ELL group being Chinese speakers. The researcher conducted an initial interview and purposely selected all seven Chinese students in Mrs. Ha's classroom as possible subjects for this study.

Mrs. Ha has a total of twenty-seven ELD Level Four students in her class. Enrolled in the class were students from the following ethnic and cultural backgrounds: Hispanic (15), Chinese (6), Vietnamese (3), Filipino (2), and Cambodian (1).

The students' ELD Level Four class was an extended instructional section that consisted of a two-period block. Students attended both periods 2 and 3 from 9:10 a.m. to 10:45 a.m. with a five-minute break in between.

### 3.5.4 Introduction of the Teacher

Mrs. Ha had worked at HMS for more than eight years. She is of Korean decent, but hails from Chicago, Illinois. She had earned her undergraduate degree in English from Wheaton College in Illinois and her Master's degree from Biola University. The HMS office manager and the principal spoke very positively about Mrs. Ha, and it was the principal's recommendation that led to the selection of Mrs. Ha and her class for the study.

### 3.6 Student Selection and Participation

The students selected to participate in the study were enrolled in HMS and were students in Mrs. Ha's ELD class. The student participants were Stephen, Chloe, Fong and Iwen. All of them identified with the Chinese culture and were Chinese language speakers. Interestingly, each was also able to identify with Western culture, given their collectively broad cross-cultural social experiences.

It should be noted here that participation in the study was not directly related to the interviewing process. Rather, these four Chinese speaking ELL students were selected for the study from Mrs. Ha's class because they were the most available students out of the limited number of Chinese speaking ELLs. Those who agreed to participate were included in the study and the limited number of available parental consent forms were completed by the appropriate individuals before the study began.

Fortunately, the study participants turned out to be very diverse in terms of their demographic backgrounds and English writing skills. At the same time, it is important to note that the results of the study, though highly informative, cannot be easily generalized. This is largely due to that inherent diversity of the Chinese students who participated in the study. In particular, the students' familiarity with the English language varied dramatically among the four participants.

For instance, one of the students had just returned to the United States after a little less than two years in China. Another student was born and raised in the United States, but spoke Cantonese at home. At the same time, this student had been placed in Special Education because of speech and language development problems. Early in his life, he was diagnosed as academically delayed. So, despite his familiarity with the English language, he was also identified as an ELL student and enrolled in the program, because of his delayed speech and language

development within a Cantonese language-dominant home environment.

A third student was born and raised in Taiwan, but had arrived in the United States only three-and-a-half years earlier. The fourth student was born and raised in Sweden, and had come to the United States three years earlier.

For example, Stephen and Iwen were born in the United States. Stephen had been placed in Special Education in various school districts before his new placement in both the Special Education and ELD programs at HMS.

Although, not a Special Education student, Iwen's family hired home tutors to provide further assistance with her developing English language fluency. Stephen and Iwen both attended after-school supplementary academic programs. Also, Iwen had previously attended a private elementary school, while the others all attended public elementary schools.

Chloe had been born and raised in a western European country before she immigrated to the United States. Iwen had returned to China at age five and attended schools there, while her dad worked in the United States. During his stay in the US, her father sent her a steady supply of American English language textbooks to help her maintain a level of comprehension. Moreover, Iwen had attended foreign schools in Shanghai which required her to speak English on a regular basis. And, finally, Iwen subscribed to and regularly read English-language magazines, newspapers and similar reading materials while in China.

Each student participated in the following ways. Chloe was interviewed for four 20-minute sessions. Fong was interviewed for two 40-minute sessions, and three 20-minute sessions. (An additional four sessions were 15-minute telephone interviews.) Iwen participated in three 20-minute interviews and two additional telephone interviews. Stephen participated in three 40-minute interviews and four 15-minute telephone interviews. Finally, Fong's mother, and both, Chloe's sister and mom also participated in individual 20-minute phone interviews.

### *3.7 Validation of Results*

All observational data was recorded as reflective field notes. The observations included situations in which each of the four students worked alone or in groups. The different ways students received feedback from their teacher were also closely monitored and evaluated through the duration of the study.

#### *3.7.1 Data Authenticity*

According to Patton (2008), the purpose of the triangulation of data sources and analytical perspectives is to increase the authenticity and accuracy of findings. Patton (2008) also warned of the challenges in collecting, analyzing and interpreting qualitative data that can ultimately skew the interpretation of the results. During the course of this study, gaining access to documents (i.e. students' seventh-grade writing assessment of the STAR test), determining the accuracy of related documents, linking documents with interviews and observations were all challenges that would influence the outcome of the results. However, careful effort was made to standardize the gathering, reviewing and documenting of data.

#### *3.7.2 Ethical Considerations*

The study did not contain any abuse, neglect, deception, lies, covert observations, or manipulation (Patton, 2008). With respect to the subjects and all participants, the responsibility to maintain a professional and ethical rapport was a foundational principal built into the study procedures. As Patton (2008) and others have emphasized, it is the researchers' obligation to treat subjects with respect.

The study was reviewed and approved by the University of Southern California Human Subjects Protection agency, the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher was attentive in informing IRB fully of the research method.

### *3.8 Conclusion*

Wilson (2005) summarized the case study method well when he expressed that the final experience demonstrates how the pieces of a case work together. This is how new knowledge is obtained. This new knowledge brings a deep sense of appreciation for the intricacies of a research case. Accordingly, the case study method provides a deeper understanding of effective practices. Consequently, this provides strong rationales to develop instructional strategies that can actually assist the ELL student in gaining greater fluency in written English.

## **4. Discussion of Findings**

This study examined how Chinese speaking ELLs react to instructor feedback on structured FPE assignments. Specifically, the study focused on the individual responses of four eighth-grade students at a middle school. The specific feedback was generated from class sessions during which the five-paragraph essay structure was taught to the students. The data emerging from student documents, observations, and interviews in this study revealed

that student reactions to teacher feedback posed a strong correlation with their subsequent state exam WMMA results.

#### 4.1 Case Study Student Profiles

Fong, Iwen, Stephen and Chloe are all in the same ELD Level Four class. Mandarin Chinese is the first language of Fong and Iwen, while Stephen and Chloe speak Cantonese Chinese. In addition, Iwen and Chloe passed their second quarter WMMA writing exam. However, Fong and Stephen failed theirs (See Table 1).

#### 4.2 Students' Reactions and Responses to Feedback

With regard to students' reactions and responses to feedback, data was collected, analyzed and synthesized into two categories: receptive and no impact.

##### 4.2.1 Receptive to Feedback

Students often responded to Mrs. Ha's comments with confidence. They trusted her authority enough to incorporate a high percentage of the teacher's feedback and comments into their revised papers. Students perceived and esteemed their teacher as the qualified and educated figure in whom they placed confidence. They passively relied on their teacher's comments, even if they might disagree with their teacher. The majority (three out of four) study participants generally saw their teacher's comments as beneficial, and useful in improving their subsequent drafts. Moreover, the students believed that integrating their teacher's comments assisted them in their language development, and helped them earn higher grades in class.

For example, not only did Chloe confide that she was a recipient of Mrs. Ha's feedback, but an analysis of her writing validated her interview responses. She incorporated 98% of Mrs. Ha's corrections on a first draft. The 2% of feedback that she did not use was a result of uncertainty. Regarding one sentence with errors, Chloe did not know how to revise it, so she deleted corresponding sentences to save time. For another, one student did not recognize the abbreviation "VT" marked on her paper. So, she overlooked a comma that Mrs. Ha had added.

In another instance, Mrs. Ha used a deletion mark on a phrase "for whoever is." However, the student only deleted "whoever is" and because of oversight, let "for" remain in the sentence. Of course, this error sounded odd when combined with her other sentences. Fortunately, after making revisions, Chloe received a perfect score on her final draft.

Iwen also shared a high receptivity to feedback from her teacher. She appreciated Mrs. Ha's feedback on practice prompts which enabled her to see her mistakes. She felt the feedback helped her to improve her writing proficiency. Iwen noted that her teacher "gives us two practice prompts and she grades them and we know like how we are writing and what we need to improve."

Chloe also shared, "I get feedback when we make mistakes. [Mrs. Ha] tells us how to make it better, because you learn from your mistakes. They are very helpful. She writes on our essays to help us do better. [What] she writes [is] very helpful." Chloe's subsequent final paper had improved tremendously because she had incorporated 95% of Mrs. Ha's feedback and comments into her writing.

By comparing Chloe's final draft of "Raymond's Run: Practice Prompt #1" with her four rough drafts, and her reliance on the teacher's corrections, the researcher found her receptivity to feedback was very high. In other words, changes made from one draft to another and the student's final draft score were reviewed and analyzed to determine to degree of openness to teacher feedback the students internalized and practiced. Mrs. Ha did not give students any grade on the first three drafts, but Chloe received a maximum score of ten points on her final draft.

Chloe honored her teacher's suggestion by carefully correcting and revising her early drafts based on Mrs. Ha's comments. Chloe also reflected, "It becomes better. It's been improved since the first draft and it's been revised. It's been edited so that the first draft is really different from the final draft, because the final draft is where I add things to it, like transitions."

Chloe passed her district WMMA and went on to earn A's in Mrs. Ha's two English classes. The positive results from Chloe's and Iwen's openness to feedback corresponded with their successful passing of the district's second quarter WMMA. Both girls earned A's in Mrs. Ha's periods 2 and 3 classes.

Overall, ELLs who successfully composed five-paragraph essays accepted the teacher's feedback in great part because of their positive experiences in doing so. Their teacher's feedback facilitated individual student mastery of the writing process and led to positive outcomes on subsequent assignments. As a result, ELLs who incorporated their teacher's feedback had a better chance to achieve a higher grade than those students who did not accept feedback.



Of course, it is an important factor to note that the final grade was being decided by the teacher who provided the feedback. It is likely that the teacher gave higher grades to students who accepted her advice, than to the unreceptive students.

Yet, what was surprising were the encouraging, solid results from Iwen's and Chloe's experiences given their willingness to incorporate a high percentage of their teacher's feedback into their own papers. Again, the result was their successful passing of the district's second quarter WMMA. Hence, the positive role of teacher feedback in ELL writing development is more convincing, because despite this evaluation being conducted by an independent researcher, the study uncovered the same results across the samples.

#### 4.2.2 Perceived "No Impact" on Student Writing Success

Fong shared that she did not learn from Mrs. Ha and was not impressed by her writing instruction. However, she liked her much more than the substitute teacher, Mrs. Johnson.

In looking at Fong's cumulative folder, she had earned all A's in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, except for one B during the second semester of the sixth grade. Her sixth grade English teacher commented on her report card, "She is an extremely hard working student. She always tries her best and her effort is commendable. Moreover, this is her first year in the United States." The teacher further commented, "Fong listens attentively and attempts the assignments by watching others. Fong's enthusiasm and desire to do all the work is admirable. Fong is very motivated to acquire English fast and is eager to participate in all class activities."

However, quite contrary to her work ethic, Fong did not pass the second writing section of the WMMA. Interestingly, her attitude towards the teacher's feedback was negative. During Fong's interview, she confessed that she did not feel the feedback had any impact on her writing. She only corrected her work based on Mrs. Ha's feedback because she was obliged to do so. In fact, she felt more troubled since she had to make sure all of the marked issues had been changed.

Contrary to the enthusiastic demeanor she demonstrated during most interviews, Fong was noticeably negative about her experience in Mrs. Ha's English class. She complained that the teacher was too busy and had not provided individual students with one-on-one assistance. She felt Mrs. Ha's comments were too general, regardless of whether Fong asked her questions in private or publicly. In addition, she was afraid that if she asked the teacher questions, she might be humiliated because Mrs. Ha once announced in class, "Why do most of you make the same mistakes?" or "Only one or two of you are doing what I asked you to do in this area."

Fong developed a strategy to instead correct her own essays without consulting the teacher. She would incorporate Mrs. Ha's comments in her first draft, but then skim through once more before turning in a draft as the final product. Fong concluded that she personally did not think her writing improved much between the first and the final drafts, but she believed, as she continued her study in America that she would see changes in her writing, soon. She received a D+ (67 points) on her second draft, but a cumulative score of A on her final draft. Consistent with these research results, she did not pass the second quarter writing section of the WMMA.

When asked what she would do if "she got stuck" on a certain topic, she responded that she seldom gets stuck. But, if she did, she still would not ask Mrs. Ha for help. Fong's attitude was somewhat rebellious, given her explanation that she might not like the teacher's suggestions, and wanted to be independent of her teacher. She wanted to express her own thoughts and felt constrained if she consulted her teacher for ideas.

The following interview sheds some light on her inner writing world: "I think carefully before I write it...I might not like the suggestion she gave.... I do not want to depend on the teacher. The only drawback is I need to spend more time to do it."

The documented analysis of Fong's second quarter WMMA writing sample placed her results at a score of three out of five. This score is labeled "approaching proficiency," a non-passing score. The results were in keeping with the findings: Students who perceive a benefit from teacher feedback performed better on standardized state-sponsored writing exams. Remember, Fong felt Mrs. Ha's feedback did not have any beneficial impact on her writing. Likewise, results from her exam sample showed that she is approaching proficiency, but has not demonstrated proficiency, yet.

During his interview, Stephen was distracted and often contradicted himself. At first, he said the teacher's feedback did not help him that much, because Mrs. Ha was too busy to make time to provide feedback. However, when the researcher asked him the same question a second time, he said that Mrs. Ha's feedback helped him greatly. He especially noted how her soothing encouragement had made him want to become an avid writer. (Stephen had a tendency to be distracted during the interview. This happened often enough that the same questions had to be asked several times during the same interview to readdress his focus.)

Stephen offered the following responses during an extended interview: “Umm a little bit but not really. She just, umm, didn’t have...I think she just too busy. So, she doesn’t have time to give feedback and stuff.” After two minutes, he altered his answer to the following: “I think it was very helpful. Because they both help me a lot and it’s kind of mostly trying to encourage me.”

In viewing and comparing Stephen’s second MMA writing sample with those in his cumulative folder, he also did not show drastic growth in his writing. Moreover, he did not pass the writing section of the MMA either.

Overall, two out of four students did not respond positively to Mrs. Ha’s feedback, claiming that it had no impact on them. That same number of students did not perform well on the WMMA, either. Table 2 provides a summary of the four research subjects’ reactions to feedback and subsequent performance on the WMMA. Of course, there could be factors beyond this study that would further explain why students are or are not receptive and why openness to feedback seems to play a role in developing writing performance. Certainly, the results from this study demonstrate an area ripe for further research.

The degree to which a student values feedback directly affects the development of writing proficiency. Fong was not receptive to her teacher’s feedback. Chloe and Iwen who enjoyed learning from the instructor’s feedback scored proficient on the writing section of the WMMA. Stephen also was receptive to the teacher’s feedback, but agreed that he struggled with writing and needed more time and additional feedback to continue improving. In reality, Stephen’s performance in general showed some measured progress up to that point, given his difficulty with language skills. His progress too should be considered in light of his receptivity to feedback.

Students had two types of general reactions to feedback: receptive (“feedback is beneficial”) and non-receptive (“feedback has no impact”). The data collected and the conclusions drawn correspond with the ELL literature review and show that successful motivated English learners do react to feedback. And, just as importantly, the manner in which students internalize instruction provided through feedback does have an effect on writing performance.

## 5. Recommendations for Future Research

The Kreizman’s study (as cited in Macaro 2003) examined the benefit of timely feedback—the effect of feedback given at the appropriate time. The study found that students are most concerned about their grades and only superficially acknowledge their teacher’s written feedback. Giving students strategic feedback with advice for improvement during the middle phase of the writing process (i.e., drafting) can enhance accuracy and quality of writing (Ferris, 2002). This intentional timing can help students focus their attention on teacher-generated suggestions throughout the writing process. If teachers wait until the writing task is completed, students will not have a chance to process feedback.

Further investigation of ELL populations fluent in different primary languages is strongly recommended, so that a comparison of student reactions to feedback can be contrasted among ELLs. At the time of this study, schedule constraints and the potential scope of this qualitative study required only four subjects to be observed. However, a large-scale study with a larger sample is recommended in order to determine whether similar results can supersede local population characteristics in order to generalize findings.

It is further recommended that this same type of study be conducted among students across different grade levels—including elementary, high school, and community college/university-level students. At the university level, samples could be drawn from student populations preparing for the writing portion of either the CBEST, TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS or GRE, for instance.

It is similarly recommended that further studies not limit observations to lessons involving the five-paragraph model. Rather, other writing models can be incorporated, provided that instructor feedback remains a key element in the instructional writing process. There are few viable models of writing for second language writers (Silva and Matsuda, 2001).

In fact, there are still many alternatives for researchers to cover—particularly, with regards to the recent topic of second language writing. It is important for ELL writing teachers to get together annually or semi-annually to share constructive feedback about their students and encourage one another to publish findings in order to promote the development of ELL writing strategies.

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Table 1. Case Study Students Profiles

Case Study Student	L1	ELD Level	2nd Quarter MMA Writing Results
Fong	Mandarin	4	Failed
Iwen	Mandarin	4	Passed
Stephen	Cantonese	4	Failed
Chloe	Cantonese	4	Passed

Fong, Iwen, Stephen and Chloe are all in the same ELD Level Four class. Fong and Iwen speak Mandarin Chinese as their first language, while Stephen and Chloe speak Cantonese Chinese. In addition, Iwen and Chloe passed their second quarter MMA writing exam. However, Fong and Stephen failed theirs.

Table 2. Impact of Receptive Feedback on MMA

Case Study Student	2nd quarter WMMA	Receptive to Feedback
Chloe	4	x
Fong	3	
Iwen	4	x
Stephen	3	

\*Total score possible on the WMMA is a 5, a score of 4 is considered “meeting” or proficient, and a score of 3 indicates “approaching” but not yet proficient.