

## Does Conferencing Feedback Improve Non-English Majors' Paragraph-Writing? A Case Study in Vietnam

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### Abstract

Corrective feedback in learning English as a foreign language (EFL), especially in writing skills, has been investigated for years. Feedback is in various modes, including direct, indirect, electronic, and conferencing between teachers and students. The current study attempted to apply teacher-student conferencing feedback to a class of non-English majors of low English proficiency levels at a local college, located in Can Tho City, South of Vietnam. The study aimed to determine: (1) *Does conferencing feedback improve the target students' writing skills?* (2) *How do these students react to conferencing feedback?* Answers to these questions are useful because they are supposed to provide more insights into the existing knowledge about the nature of conferencing feedback regarding its potential to be applied in different cultural contexts. The data-collecting instruments of pre-post tests and pre-post questionnaire surveys were employed. There were five conferences between the teacher and the participants during the intervention program. The results showed that conferencing feedback enhanced the participants' English writing performance through the intervention. It also gained their positive attitudes demonstrated in the post questionnaire. Thereby, discussions and recommendations are provided.

*Keywords:* Conference, conferencing feedback, non-English majors, paragraph writing, Vietnam

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## Introduction

Learning English as a foreign language is not an easy job for most students, predominantly non-English majored ones. And when it comes to language skills, writing is widely deemed the most challenging to the learner because this complex skill requires the writer to undergo proper training and regular writing practice to be able to use suitable grammatical structures, lexical items, written conventions, and mechanical techniques. Nguyen (2019) contended, "These challenges make writing one of the most difficult skills to develop and create an overreliance on the teacher for all kinds of corrections and guidance" (p.121). Over the past years, upon working at a local college (located in Can Tho City, Vietnam), the researcher of the current study had access to non-English majored students' academic data and has witnessed students' poor writing performance. Most of them are poor writers in English, and their writing skills do not seem to improve unless significant instructional changes should be made. Many English teachers at this College have repeatedly complained about how they struggled to improve students' writing skills. The students whose scores in writing were low often demonstrated modest self-esteem, humble efforts, and developed negative attitudes towards writing tests and writing instruction. This improvement-needing status is commonly found among most Vietnamese learners of English (Luu, 2014; Nguyen, 2016). Therefore, something should be done about it because

Writing is important in studying all subjects and in all professions. Only by writing well can you give a good account of yourself as a student, and when applying for employment, and in a career when you write letters, instructions and reports. It is by your writing that others know you." (Barrass, 1995, p.2)

Teachers have the distinct responsibility to nurture a student's learning and to provide feedback in such a manner that the student does not leave the classroom feeling defeated (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990), and it should be considered "as a means of drawing learners' attention to accurate language use without disrupting communicative classroom interaction" (Loewen, 2012, p.24). Therefore, how to approach the evaluation of student writing and deliver subsequent feedback to best help improve their writing skills is the researcher's great concern. However, written corrective feedback traditionally used does not always prove to be very useful because it "tends to show students that the teacher's agenda is more important than their own, that what they wanted to say is less relevant than the teacher's impression of what they should have said" (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982, p.158). One study by Kamberi (2013), using several types of feedback (corrective, electronic, metalinguistic, conferencing, peer-feedback), reported that the participants most valued direct corrective feedback and conferencing feedback. However, Kamberi concluded that "from a learner's perspective, there were mixed perceptions on which strategy was the most effective in error correction" (p.1689). Another study by Alhumidi and Uba (2016) informed that indirect feedback effectively improved their writing and language skills. Furthermore, previous research on multiple components associated with conferencing feedback (CF), such as student personalities and cultural backgrounds (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Sperling, 1990); participant abilities (Freedman & Sperling, 1985); teacher attitudes (Walker & Elias, 1987), etc., has yet to gain ultimate conclusions on CF. Thus, further research on CF should be explored as an alternative approach to student writing feedback. As Goldstein and Conrad (1990) noted: "writing conferences are not stable entities, but rather, dynamic events affected by context and participants." (p.459)

Since no study on conferencing feedback has been done at this local College, the current study was aimed to implement it to non-English majored students of low English proficiency levels in their English paragraph writing class. To its goal, two main questions are raised: (1) *Does conferencing feedback improve the target students' writing skills?* (2) *How do these students react to conferencing feedback?* Answers to these questions are useful because they are supposed to provide more insights into the existing knowledge about the nature of CF regarding its potential to be applied in different cultural contexts. They also help the researcher make valid instructional modifications and suggestions to her colleagues from this research-site College and elsewhere.

### Literature Review

The term “feedback” is used to describe the information that comes back from the reader to the writer (in the educational setting, they are teachers and students). Feedback is considered a source of input that encourages writers to improve their written work and develop their writing skills (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Therefore, feedback plays a crucial role in students' revision activities, and it contributes to the quality of their subsequent writings (Freedman, 1985; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Nguyen, 2019).

### Conferencing Feedback

Teacher-student conferencing feedback (CF) is a form of feedback in which *the teacher meets each student individually and makes oral comments about the student's writing*. This can be done in class time or outside the classroom. This feedback is “conversational dialogue” in which meanings are continually being negotiated while emphasizing the two-way communication (Freedman & Sperling, 1985). It is “individual, one-on-one teacher-student conversations about the students' writing or writing process.” (Bayraktar, 2012, p.709)

### Different Labels for Conferencing Feedback

Over the last decades, CF has been studied at various dimensions under different labels, such as *assisted performance* (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), *one-to-one teaching* (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983), *one-to-one interaction* (Sperling, 1991); *response sessions* (Hansen, 1987), *conversational dialogue* (Freedman, 1985), *meaningful contact* (Lerner, 2005), and *dynamic assessment* (Ableeva, 2010; Afshari, Amirian, & Tavakoli, 2020; Poehner, 2008).

Though CF is labeled under several names, its process and purpose are consistently defined by researchers. For example, all conferences have a goal, following predictable procedures, and putting students in the position of partners for collaboration (Anderson, 2000). In these conferences, there is no single process to follow. Instead, they can be conducted differently according to the student's needs, writing proficiency levels, and roles (Newkirk, 1989).

### Kinds of Conferencing Feedback

Different researchers have different classifications of conferencing feedback. Unlike Calkins (1986), who divides conferences into content, design, process, evaluation, and editing, Anderson (2000) classifies conferences into four categories: rehearsal, drafting, revision, and editing. Reigstad and McAndrew (1980), in contrast, group conferences into three subcategories: student-centered, teacher-centered, and collaborative. In student-centered conferences, students are treated as conventional equals and fellow writers since they initiate a conversation about

various problems, and the tutor suggests strategies or alternatives. In teacher-centered conferences, the student tends to sit passively when the teacher reads through the draft, corrects mechanical mistakes, and supplies alternative to improve writing. In a collaborative conference, both the teacher and the student have equal chances to start and initiate the conversation.

### ***Characteristics of Useful Conferencing Feedback***

The goals of CF are to inform students about their writing skills and progress. Besides, students can talk, ask questions, provide possible solutions, and get adequate feedback from a more experienced writer during a one-on-one writing conference. To reach these positive outcomes, CF should be carefully planned and conducted based on the following characteristics (Anderson, 2000; Atwell, 1998; Bayraktar, 2012; Graves, 1983; Sommers, 1982): (i) Being predictable: predictable conferences make students familiar with the steps and the procedures, and help save time; (ii) Being focused: when determining what to focus on, teachers need to remember two principles: focus on one or two of students' writing problems, and dealing with content and meaning before usage and convention; (iii) Providing solutions: teachers should tell students what to do or what to write; (iv) Exchanging roles between teachers and students: students should be encouraged to ask questions and provide solutions; (v) Providing meaningful conversation: both teachers and students should talk during the conferences; (iv) Having humor: the playful atmosphere is necessary for having a productive writing conference.

### ***Previous Studies***

As noted above, research related to corrective feedback and CF has been concerned by many researchers (Afshari *et al.*, 2020; Alhumidi & Uba, 2016; Ahmadi & Besharati, 2017; An, 2019; Bayraktar, 2012; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Kamberi, 2013; Lee, 2008; Leung, 2008; Loewen, 2012; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Saito, 1994; Silva, 1997; Sperling, 1990; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; etc.). Three typical studies are described below.

In the study by Baleghizadeh and Gordani (2012), three groups of EFL students participated in a 12-week course of academic writing. The first experimental group received direct corrective feedback on grammatical errors in their papers, while the second experimental one was provided with both immediate feedback and teacher-student conferences during which the class discussed and gave their ideas about the problems with the errors made. The control group received only the teacher's comment on the content of their writings (i.e., no feedback on grammatical errors). The results showed that the student-teacher conference feedback group was significantly better than the other two groups.

Yamalee and Tangkiengsirisin (2019) conducted a study at a private university in Bangkok, Thailand. It involved 20-sophomore English-majored undergraduates being a sample/experimental group. For the integrated treatment program to this group, during a one-semester compulsory course of "Paragraph Writing" (p.253), each student's writing drafts were provided with written feedback/comments first by the teacher, then followed by teacher-student conferencing. The results found that students improved their writing via a pre-post test pattern, and all of them had a positive attitude towards implementing integrated feedback in the classroom.

A recent study was done by Afshari et al. (2020) among English-majored male students in an Iranian university. This study applied “group-dynamic assessment” (p.445). For the experimental group, a student wrote his essay on the board, and other students were asked to read the sentences silently and just observe (the interactions between the teacher and the assigned student). They were not allowed to mention the errors, provide corrections, or guide the student on the board. In each session, each student’s essay was written on the board, and the teacher tried to guide him to correct his errors through mediation, i.e., the teacher first asked him to read his essay carefully, find, and fix the errors he could detect by himself. For the errors the student could not notice, the teacher started guiding him with the most implicit hints and gradually moved towards more explicit ones. When the student could not complete the task even with the most explicit hints, the teacher turned to another student to go through the same procedures. The results found that the experimental group outperformed the comparison group who received only regular feedback. This study also showed that the former group expressed a very positive attitude towards applying group-dynamic assessment in writing classes.

Most participants in previous studies were English-majored. Thus, it is justifiable for the present study to apply CF and test its benefits to non-English-majored students, whose numbers are far more in most colleges and universities in the current Vietnam’s context.

## **Method**

### ***Research Design***

The current study followed a single-group pre-post quasi-experimental design (Bhattacharjee, 2012). A pre-test and post-test research design was used to collect quantitative data about the effectiveness of teacher-student conferencing feedback. This pre-test and post-test design measured whether there was a significant difference in students’ writing skills before and after the intervention. Besides, to get information about how students perceived the use of CF (the treatment program), a subsequent questionnaire survey was conducted. This survey is significant because students’ feelings and attitudes toward CF are valuable information for the field (Bayraktara, 2012).

### ***Participants***

The participants for the pre-test and post-test were 48 students (17 females and 31 males) from one entire existing class in one College (located in Can Tho City, South of Vietnam), where the researcher is working fulltime. Thus, this sampling technique was a convenient one. The participants were all the first-year students majoring in Law Service, (i.e., non-English majors). They were all EFL Vietnamese students whose ages ranged from 18 to 20. Although they did learn English at secondary school for some years, their English proficiency was still at low levels, especially the writing skill, because their English experience at secondary school was mostly grammar knowledge and reading skills to serve their high school graduation exams.

The researcher is also the teacher in charge of teaching this class. Working at this College for several years, she was motivated by the CF framework and attempted to apply it in her class. She believed that students, especially those who were more potent in English writing, were enthusiastic about conferencing-feedback because it allowed them to learn more about the mistakes they made and get actively involved in the discussion. However, she also understood that

giving feedback to weak students, whose works were poorly-written, was hard since it was sometimes challenging for the teacher to find positive comments. Besides, some students were so quiet and did not contribute much to the conferencing process. Because of this, the conference might turn out to be teacher-centered, which was not expected. Furthermore, some students would complain about not being able to spare time for the meetings, and others tended to feel disappointed and lose motivation if there was too much focus on the mistakes they made.

### *Course-book*

The course-book currently used for non-majored classes at this College is “American English File” (by Latham-Koeing, Oxenden, & Seligson 2008). The book is integrated-skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing, with a balanced focus on vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and functional language. The course lasted 15 weeks (from January 4<sup>th</sup> to May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019). During the course, the students were required to take four progress-tests and one mid-term test (i.e., five tests in total), in which writing was included. Each test was designed into four parts: vocabulary (20%), grammar (30%), reading (20%), and writing (30%). For writing, in the first test, students were required to write a paragraph on how often they spent their time with friends, while the second required them to write a description of their vacation. In test three, they were asked to write a paragraph about healthy food. For test four, they wrote a paragraph about a movie they had seen recently. In the mid-term test, they were required to write a paragraph about a book they liked best.

### *Conferencing-Feedback Procedure*

On the first day, intending to guard against violation or invasion of the students' privacy, the teacher asked the students whether they were willing to participate in a study. Since all of the students agreed to take part in, the teacher then introduced CF to the class. First, the teacher started by explaining the concept of “conferencing-feedback.” The teacher also informed the students that this would be used as a tool for feedback during the course. Clear and detailed guidelines for CF were also provided. The students were encouraged to discuss and ask questions about things they were not clear and whether they agreed with the given suggestions. The teacher's purpose was to help the students figure out the whole picture of their future work and minimize their potential confusion.

Thereby, some planning and preparations should be done to ensure each successful conferencing feedback. Since the feedback was the teacher's responses to the students' work, it occurred after they had finished each of their four tests. On grading the students' writing papers, the teacher noted instances of strengths and problems for easy references and briefly commented on the student's note-card. After that, the teacher arranged the subsequent feedback conferences. Since it was impossible to comment on everything due to the shortage of time, the teacher just focused on some issues that stood out clearly. One week before each conferencing session, the teacher reminded the students to sign up for writing feedback and then informed them about the conference schedule. The time allotted for each student's feedback was from five to seven minutes.

At the beginning of each conference, the teacher explained the agenda of the meeting. To avoid a teacher-dominated conference atmosphere, the teacher asked each student what aspects of the draft he/she liked and which they wanted to change. Then, the teacher returned the draft,

allowing the student to read the comments and asked if they found anything unclear and provided an explanation if necessary. The whole rest of the conference flowed naturally from the student's questions and concerns. The teacher also asked the students to make notes about the ideas and suggestions. However, not all the students who participated in the conferences were enthusiastic about CF. Some of them were shy, reluctant, and uncommunicative. Therefore, the teacher, sensitive to each student's needs and moods, had to adjust her working styles accordingly. She also paid much attention to avoid discouraging or causing embarrassment to the students by focusing more on what the students had done well rather than the mistakes they made. For the teacher, conferences were opportunities to learn about the students as human beings and their strengths and weaknesses in writing. Teacher-student conferences aimed to encourage students to let their voices heard and to ensure that students would benefit from the meetings as much as possible. The conference session ended before students were reminded not to throw away the draft and do follow-up activities such as rewriting the paragraph if appropriate. Detailed information about the CF sessions was as follows:

Table 1. *Information about CF sessions*

| Feedback sessions | Date                | The total amount of time   | Number of students present |
|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1st session       | February 15th, 2019 | Three hours                | 35                         |
| 2nd session       | March 9th, 2019     | Two hours and 45 minutes   | 29                         |
| 3rd session       | March 16th, 2019    | Three hours                | 39                         |
| 4th session       | April 13th, 2019    | Three hours and 10 minutes | 41                         |
| 5th session       | April 27            | Three hours and 17 minutes | 41                         |

#### *Pre-and-posttest Instrument*

The tests were aimed at investigating whether CF would make a difference in the student's paragraph-writing scores between the pre-test and post-test. Convinced by Alderson, Clapham, and Wall (1995), the researcher chose a similar pre-test and post-test because they were based on the course objectives rather than the course content. The question of whether students would be allowed to select the topic was not considered since it did not make a difference to test takers' scores (Jennings, Fox, Graves, & Shohamy, 1999). To avoid students' performances not being influenced by what they just learned in the course such as vacation, food, health, and movies, the researcher chose a neutral topic that was more relevant to the students' low proficiency level and would better demonstrate students' writing skills. Also, with the belief that using identical tests would affect the reliability of the samples due to their familiarity with the topic, the researcher chose topically different but rhetorically similar topics for the pre-test and post-test. Intending to prevent subjectivity and risk of reliability bias due to involvement in the issue, the researcher consulted four experienced colleagues for their views of the chosen topics (Table two). These teachers all agreed that the topics were relevant to the student level and appropriate for the research.

Table 2. *Writing prompts for the pre-test and post-test*

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Pre-test  | You have 30 minutes to complete this test.<br>Write a paragraph to describe your <i>close friend</i> . Describe his/her appearance, personality, and the reason why you are close to each other.<br>You should write at least 100 words.     |
| Post-test | You have 30 minutes to complete this test.<br>Write a paragraph to describe a <i>famous person</i> that you admire. Describe his/her appearance, personality, and the reason why you admire him/her.<br>You should write at least 100 words. |

### *Test Administration*

The time allocated for the pre-test was 30 minutes. It was conducted during the first class session with the presence of the researcher as an invigilator. Prior to its administration, the researcher explained the purpose of the test and asked if the students agreed to participate. Since all the students volunteered to participate in the research, the test was conducted. First, the researcher asked the students to sit apart to ensure that they did the test independently. The researcher also informed the students that no materials for reference were allowed during the test. Then the teacher wrote the writing prompt on the board for the students to copy down. The students were allowed to ask if there was anything they did not understand about the prompt. Since no questions were posed, the test started at 7:30 AM on January 4th, 2019. It ended at 8 AM on the same day. Then, the students were asked to stop writing, and the researcher collected 48 writing scripts.

The post-test was also administered to the same class in the last class session (May 7th, 2019). It took place in the same procedures, rules, environment, and time duration as in the pre-test. The test was also administered with the researcher as the invigilator. There were no questions for clarification about the writing prompt from the test-takers during the test. Then, 48 writing scripts were received.

### *Method of Marking*

In the current study, the researcher chose the analytical method for marking the writing scripts since it was the most relevant to the scope of the study: to measure writing proficiency characterized by writing sub-skills such as task fulfillment, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Thus, a marking-scheme currently used on writing courses at this College was employed (see Appendix A). According to this scheme, writing competency is characterized by content, organization, mechanics, grammar, and style. Each of these characteristics is accompanied by explicit descriptors of what is meant by the different band-scales. A range of possible scores is given for each band. These scores can be converted into an overall ten-point grade.

### *The Raters*

For consistency in marking, many facets of scoring were taken into consideration, including raters' gender, personality, professional background, and experience. Two markers participated in this study. They were both female writing teachers who were experienced, careful, and responsible in every aspect of language teaching and assessment. They were aged 42 and 45,

and both have gained more than 10-year experience in teaching and writing-marking. Adequate training was provided to the raters by the researcher. Its primary purpose was to establish consistency in marking between the raters (inter-rater consistency) and within the same rater (intra-raters consistency). Rater training was conducted through pre-marking training on-site. Initially, the raters read and discussed the scales together before practicing marking a sample script together. Next, ratings were compared to check whether markers had similar expectations before going on with the rest of the scripts. After discussing for a while, the researcher and two raters together set up the working-criteria for marking as follows:

- (i) The time needed for marking each script was about between three and five minutes.
- (ii) Answers that do not adhere to the writing prompt got no point.
- (iii) Illegible handwriting was not judged.
- (iv) The paragraph should be written with 100 words, at least. If the candidate only wrote a few words, the paragraph would be deemed too short for assessment, and consequently was awarded no point.

Then, each rater worked independently with both the pre- and post-test scripts (blind-marking, i.e., no student's name on the script). When all the scripts were marked, the researcher checked the inter-rater coefficient. Initially, it was only 0.86 or 86% agreement. Thus, a post-marking discussion between the researcher and the raters was held, and all the scripts were double-checked one by one to raise the agreement to 100%.

#### *Questionnaire Instrument*

To know how the subjects perceived of CF, the researcher used the questionnaire because it allowed the researcher to reach a broad audience in a limited time. A well-designed questionnaire can provide keen insights into how participants think and perceive the situation (Bernard, 2000). Besides, it would elicit easily countable answers on a range of standard questions/statements. In this questionnaire, there was a series of questions/statements to which the respondents were to react either by writing out their answers or checking an option among the existing answers. The questionnaire survey was administered at the beginning (pre-questionnaire) and the end of the experiment program (post-questionnaire). Since the participants were still at a low proficiency level of English, the researcher chose to use simple wording for the questionnaire and translated it into Vietnamese to be easy for them to answer.

The first section of the questionnaire was designed to get some demographic information about the respondents so that the researcher could best interpret the results of the questionnaire. There were three questions for this part, aiming to get information about age, gender, and learning experience of the subjects. The second section, a five-scale question format, was used so that the respondents could tick to which degree they agreed with the issues related to CF in comparison with the regular feedback, ranging from *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *uncertain*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*. The option 'strongly agree' means 'clearly aware of' and 'strongly support' CF use. The aim of each question was specified in details as follows:

- Block 1, finding out whether the respondent thinks CF is a useful tool to improve students' writing skills: statements 1 – 13 (13 statements in total).

- Block 2, finding out the students' attitudes towards CF: statements 14 – 20 (seven statements).

The researcher believed that, with this question format, it was easy for the respondent to respond and comfortable for the researcher to quantify the data since these options could be coded to check reliability. Twenty questions were designed in this section.

The third section was to obtain the respondent's viewpoints on CF. They were open-ended questions, which required the respondents to write down their own opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of CF. The researcher believed that by designing some open-ended questions in the questionnaire, more qualitative information could be obtained and allowed the researcher to look at the issues from multiple angles. After the questionnaire was designed entirely, it was translated into Vietnamese to suit the level of the target participants.

#### *Piloting the Questionnaire*

To get feedback from professional colleagues, the researcher consulted four writing teachers who understood the survey purpose to examine the survey critically and determined whether the questionnaire was appropriate to accomplish the survey objectives. The feedback elicited from those colleagues was then used for editing the questionnaire to make it more transparent and more effective. The final version of the questionnaire was then used for a pilot survey with seven students from a different class. Since the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese, the pilot respondents did not find any problems reading or making sense.

#### *Administering the Questionnaire*

During the questionnaire administration, everything was considered so that the respondents would feel comfortable. First, the researcher gave clear overall directions, including some information about the purpose of the survey and what they were expected to do. Then, the questionnaires were distributed in an orderly manner. When the administration was going on, the researcher circulated among the respondents to help when ambiguities or confusion arose. The questionnaires were completed after approximately eight to 10 minutes. Finally, samples were collected from both the pre- and post-questionnaire.

### **Findings**

#### *Pre-posttest Scores*

*Table 3. Descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test scores (n=48)*

| Statistics    | Pre-test scores | Post-test scores |
|---------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Mean          | 4.813           | 6.260            |
| Median        | 5.000           | 6.500            |
| Mode          | 5.0             | 7.0              |
| Std deviation | 1.6231          | 1.3487           |
| Range         | 6.0             | 4.5              |
| Low - high    | 1.5- 7.5        | 3.5 - 8          |

Table three shows a difference between the pre-test and post-test scores across all statistic aspects. The means, median, and mode increased from the pre-test to the post-test (4.81, 5.00, 5.00

to 6.26, 6.50, 7.00, respectively). On the contrary, the standard deviation, range, and low-high were found in a decreasing pattern from the pre-test to the post-test, indicating the distance among the subjects' scores become narrowed down at the end of the CF treatment program. To determine whether there is a significant difference in the mean scores before and after the treatment (4.81 and 6.26, respectively), an independent sample t-test analysis was done.

Table 4. *Independent sample t-test results (n=48)*

| t      | df | Sig.<br>(2-tailed) | Mean<br>Difference | Std. Error<br>Difference |
|--------|----|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| -4.754 | 94 | .000               | -1.448             | .305                     |

Since Table four reveals that the value p (Sig. 2-tailed) = .000 is smaller than 0.05 ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), there is a statistically significant difference between the two tests in mean scores. Thus, it supports the conclusion that the target students have achieved better writing performances from the pre-test to the post-test.

#### Questionnaire Results

Although 48 students took both pre-test and post-test, only 41 volunteered to partake in the questionnaire survey. After coding the respondents' choices into numbers, with 1='Strongly disagree', 2='Disagree', 3='Uncertain', 4='Agree', and 5='Strongly agree'. The data were then entered into the excel sheet and then analyzed using the statistical SPSS version 20. The reliability level was .897, and .723 for the pre-questionnaire, and the post-questionnaire.

In Table five, the first statement block was designed to investigate the respondents' views on the effects of CF on English writing skills before (pre-questionnaire) and after (post-questionnaire) the treatment program.

Table 5. *First block's descriptive statistics of questionnaire scores (n=41)*

| Statements:<br>1 - 12 | N  | Mean   | Std.<br>Deviation | Std. Error<br>Mean | Sig.<br>(2-tailed) |
|-----------------------|----|--------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Pre-questionnaire     | 41 | 2.8405 | .5462             | .0853              | .000               |
| Post-questionnaire    | 41 | 3.4390 | .5030             | .0785              |                    |

As seen from the table above, the pre-questionnaire mean is lower than that of the post-questionnaire (2.84 and 3.43, respectively). Also, the t-test result is  $p=.000$ , indicating a statistically significant difference between the two means. In other words, the positive effects of CF on writing performances among the participants have been acknowledged.

Likewise, Table six below displays the participants' positive attitudes towards CF found increasing mean from the pre- to the post-questionnaire.

Table 6. *Second block's descriptive statistics of questionnaire scores (n=41)*

| Statements:<br>13 - 20 | N | Mean | Std.<br>Deviation | Std. Error<br>Mean | Sig.<br>(2-tailed) |
|------------------------|---|------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|------------------------|---|------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|

|                    |    |        |       |       |      |
|--------------------|----|--------|-------|-------|------|
| Pre-questionnaire  | 41 | 2.8400 | .5484 | .0856 | .000 |
| Post-questionnaire | 41 | 3.8100 | .4078 | .0636 |      |

All these suggest that after the treatment program, there is a statistical difference in what respondents believed about the effectiveness of CF in improving writing skills and enhancing their learning attitudes.

For section B, of 41 taking part in the questionnaire, only 33 students answered the open-ended questions. Among them, 27 (out of 33 students, accounting for 81.1%) stated that CF was very beneficial, while six students (18.1%) preferred the regular feedback. Most of them (72.7%) wrote that CF helped them recognize long-existing grammatical errors they had never identified before. Similarly, 60.6% of the respondents stated that CF was thought-provoking and fun decoding what the teacher underlined as mistakes. Besides, 42.4% of the respondents wrote that CF gave them opportunities to tell the teacher what they intended to express in the tests. Some respondents (12.2%) also cited that CF with the teacher helped them realize their strengths and weaknesses in writing skills. In contrast, some others appreciated the opportunity of being more exposed to different views and more information than other types of feedback. However, a small number of respondents were not in favor of CF. Some of them (12.2%) said that they did not feel very comfortable at CF, while some other (9.1%) felt embarrassed when realizing their stupid errors in writing, and some (15.2%) could not afford enough time for all their conferences.

## Discussion

The obtained results from the pre- and post-test (Table three, four) in the current study show a possible effect of CF on students' writing performances (even though not all the participants were present in all the given feedback sessions, see Table one above). This finding matches those reported by Afshari et al. (2020), Ahmadi and Besharati (2017), Baleghizadeh and Gordani (2012), Freedman (1985), Hyland and Hyland (2001), Leung (2008), Yamalee and Tangkiengsirisin (2019), who endorsed that CF improves students' writing performance. This is mostly because the one-on-one dialogue in CF helps the writer notice those issues, errors, and problems that may arise in the written draft. This kind of feedback provides students with more authentic opportunities for negotiation and interaction. As a result, those students who receive CF will likely take sufficient time (mediated by the teacher) reconsidering their works, reflecting, and possibly making necessary modifications for better-written output. Added to these is that students attain the sense of how they are doing and which aspects of writing they should pay more attention to (Brookhart, 2008; Lee, 2008; Saito, 1994). These repetitive activities on purpose in the writing class are supposed, sooner or later, to transform the involved student from being other-regulated to self-regulate in lifelong learning afterward.

In addition to improved writing performance, as seen in the questionnaire results (Table five, and six), the treatment program in the current study did impact positively on the participants' attitudes towards CF, demonstrated by a significant difference in their scoring between the pre- and post-questionnaire. This finding is aligned with the relevant literature discussed by Afshari et al. (2020), Ahmadi and Besharati (2017), Freedman (1985), Hyland and Hyland (2001),

Yamalee and Tangkiengsirisin (2019), etc., which reveal that CF boosts students' learning motivation since it is more fun and helpful than the regular feedback. Furthermore, CF is believed to render a channel for two-way communication so that meanings can always be negotiated (Freeman, 1985; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). The finding also confirms the argument presented by Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) and Sommers (1982) that CF gives students opportunities to discuss what they intend to express or have their voice heard, i.e., making democracy and learner-centeredness present in the classroom. Thereby, it proves that CF applied in the current study has worked quite well as a learning motivator for non-English majors of low English proficiency level in Vietnam's present context, which has yet to be reported within the country.

However, since it was the first time they practiced FC, the participants' reservations in the open-ended question section were understandable. Time-constraint, feeling anxious, and lack of comport were the significant drawbacks noted by the surveyed subjects in the current study. These negative points have been reported in previous research. Hattie and Timperley (2007)'s study warned that when CF is predominately negative, it can discourage student effort and achievement. Meanwhile, Hyland and Hyland (2001) contended that conferencing requires large amounts of time and specific interaction skills, which some teachers and students may not have. Therefore, teachers should be sensitive to the needs of students and adjust their working styles accordingly because each student participating in a conference brings to that conference a unique personality that may affect how that student behaves in the conference (Goldstein & Conrard, 1990). They should also have to resist the temptation to adopt the attitude "the teacher 'knows best,' knows what the writer should do and how it should be done, and feels protective because his or her competence is superior to that of the writer" (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982, p.159). Otherwise, students will probably benefit from FC, not as much as they should.

## Conclusion

Writing skills in English learning as a foreign language is deemed challenging to most students, predominantly non-English majored ones, because this skill requires them to master pertinent knowledge and sub-skills. On the obtained results of the participants' improved writings via CF, the current study proves the potential of CF implementation to non-English majored students of low English levels in Vietnam's present context. Though time-consuming and limited in certain aspects, this mode of feedback, if conducted properly, does contribute to improving the learner's writing performances and their learning motivation mediated by the teacher who purposefully and tactfully engages the learner to productively reflect on their written output containing strengths and weaknesses, and learn how to progress on their own for better learning.

The current study's findings, however, should not be generalized widely elsewhere within the country and beyond owing to its limited participant sample and instruments for data collection. It also lacks a control group for result comparison. Therefore, it is recommended that this study be replicated with a combination of descriptive and experimental research methods, a larger number of participants from the same language background, motivation, and learning styles. Also, the kinds of discourse strategies used by the teacher and the student, and the reasons for their variation are rich sources for further research. Besides, how instructional modes, students' level of proficiency, and cultural background affect CF outcomes should be the focus of future studies. It

is hoped that the result of this study will be of some use to future research so that a thorough understanding of this issue and confirmation of the findings will be obtained.

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## Appendix A: Marking Scheme

Table 7. Rubric for evaluation of paragraph writing

| Point Value                  | 2 points  | 1 point  | 0.5 points  | 0 points   |
|------------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Topic Sentence               | Interesting, original topic sentence, reflecting thought and insight; focused on one interesting main idea. | A clearly stated topic sentence presents one main idea.                    | The acceptable topic sentence presents one idea.                      | Missing, invalid, or inappropriate topic sentence; the main idea is missing. |
| Supporting Details           | Interesting, concrete, and descriptive examples and details with explanations that relate to the topic.     | Examples and details relate to the topic and some explanation is included. | A sufficient number of examples and details that relate to the topic. | Insufficient, vague, or undeveloped examples.                                |
| Organization and Transitions | A thoughtful, logical progression of supporting examples;   | Details are arranged in a logical progression;                             | Acceptable arrangement of examples;                                   | No discernible pattern of organization;                                      |

|           |   |  |  |   |
|-----------|---|--|--|---|
|           | Mature transitions between ideas.   | appropriate transitions.   | transitions may be weak.   | Unrelated details; no transitions.  |
| Style     | Appropriate tone, distinctive voice; pleasing variety in sentence structure; Vivid diction, precise word choices. | Appropriate tone; Clear sentences with varied structures; Effective diction. | Acceptable tone; some variety in sentence structures; Adequate diction and word choices. | Inconsistent or Inappropriate tone; Awkward, unclear, or incomplete sentences; Bland diction, poor word choice. |
| Mechanics | Consistent standard English usage, spelling, and punctuation. No errors.  | Some errors, but none major, in usage, spelling, or punctuation. (1-2)       | A few errors in usage, spelling, or punctuation (3-4)                                    | Distracting errors in usage, spelling, or punctuation.  |

Grade Equivalent: A= 8-10 points; B= 6-7 points; C=4-5 points; D=2-3 points; F=0-1 point.

**Appendix B: Questionnaire for Students**

*This questionnaire aims at surveying the learner’s view of the conventional assessments in use. Your completion of this questionnaire is highly appreciated. Please note that individual questionnaires are entirely anonymous, and the data collected are used in the research paper only.*

**Section A:**

1. Your age:
2. Sex:     Male             Female
3. How long have you been learning English? \_\_\_\_\_ years.

Section B. In this section, we are seeking your opinions about the effectiveness of conferencing feedback (CF). Please tick to which degree you agree with the following statements.

*Directions:* There are five options and tick √ for your case to each statement.

1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Unsure; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree.

| Statements  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. CF is productive since it gives students an explanation of what they are doing correctly and incorrectly in writing.                                   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 2. Students may gain an accurate impression of their writing performance if they can discuss their work with the teacher.                                 |   |   |   |   |   |
| <b>3. CF draws students’ attention to more than surface errors.</b>   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 4. Students’ writing skills will improve thanks to CF.  |   |   |   |   |   |
| 5. Students benefit from the conferences with the teacher as much as they should.   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 6. When students are provided with feedback in conferencing, they reconsider their work, reflect the meaning of their work, and modify their information. |   |   |   |   |   |
| 7. CF is suitable to students’ learning styles.   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 8. Student's writing skills will improve if they are allowed to look back at their strengths and weaknesses through discussions with their teacher.       |   |   |   |   |   |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Students attend more to the mistakes in CF.   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10. CF encourages students to rethink about the mistakes in writing.   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 11. CF tells students how much progress they have made in writing.   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 12. CF provides students with authentic opportunities for negotiation and interaction on writing skills, which do not exist in traditional classroom activities. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13. CF is very negotiable between the teacher and students.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14. Students may feel comfortable with the role teachers expect them to play in conferences.   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 15. Students' motivation will be enhanced if they receive CF.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 16. Students are encouraged to question the teacher's feedback or asking the teacher to clarify what they mean by their comments.                                |  |  |  |  |  |
| 17. Students feel motivated in CF because it is a kind of classroom democracy.   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 18. CF is believed to preserve students' right to have their voices heard.   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 19. CF enhances students' learning motivation.   |  |  |  |  |  |
| 20. CF is an excellent way to encourage the development of autonomy.   |  |  |  |  |  |

Section C. Please answer these questions.

What type of feedback do you think benefit you more?

\_\_\_\_\_ Conferencing feedback                      \_\_\_\_\_ Traditional feedback

Why: .....

.....

.....

.....

*Thank you for spending time on giving the responses!*