

Teacher Written Feedback on Student Writing: Teachers' and Learners' Perspectives

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Abstract—Using quantitative and qualitative research instruments, this study investigates teachers' feedback on students' writing in an EFL teaching context in the Republic of Benin. The main purpose is to determine the nature of the feedback that the teachers provide, and to identify their rationale for feedback provision. The study also attempts to provide insights into the learners' opinions about their teachers' feedback. The results indicate that the majority of the participant EFL students are not favourable to their teachers' feedback practices, and therefore, do not use the feedback that they get effectively. The study also reveals that while the teachers consider their feedback as a tool to promote accuracy in writing in their EFL classes, the students prefer a type of teacher feedback that would also take into account the content of their written production. Suggestions are made in the study to help bridge the gap between teachers' practices and learners' expectations.

Index Terms—EFL writing, learner attitude to teacher feedback, process approach, product approach, teacher feedback

I. INTRODUCTION

Responding to student writing is a crucial component of the teaching-to-write process. Similarly, students' access to the teacher's feedback and their effective use of it constitute an important aspect of the learning-to-write process. In writing classes where the provision of feedback is not part of the teacher's pedagogical practices, or where learners are unable to process the feedback they get from the teacher on their writing, developing adequate writing proficiency is quite impossible. The importance of the teacher written feedback has largely been documented by a considerable body of research in the areas of ESL and EFL writing. In both English language teaching contexts, especially in classrooms where the teaching of writing is process-oriented, teachers and students have acknowledged the crucial value of the teacher written feedback. Not only does it facilitate students' revisions, but it also assists them during the step to step learning-to-write process (Harmer, 2004; Peterson, 2010). Teachers in such contexts strive to use adequate strategies to respond effectively to their students' writing in order to help them improve their writing skill. However, in some EFL contexts, teachers carry out the teaching of writing through a product-oriented approach for two reasons: some of them simply have little or no knowledge of the process approach to teaching writing. Others, the majority, resort to the product approach because of some context-related constraints such as a rigid time-based syllabus, a product-oriented evaluation system, and large class size.

In the Republic of Benin, where secondary school syllabi in all school subjects are time-based, and classrooms are overcrowded (40 to 70 students), the approach to teaching and assessing student writing is product-oriented. Providing written feedback on students' writing and coaching them through follow-up revisions is considered a burden that EFL teachers do not even think of integrating to their pedagogical practices. Giving summative feedback on students' writing is a practice that is largely adopted by all teachers because of the context-related constraints previously mentioned and a school evaluation system which requires teachers in all subjects to assess learners within a given week period scheduled by the school administration and to report grades to the vice-principal's office.

This study attempts to uncover the rationale underlying teachers' provision of a summative feedback on students' writing and their expectations in Benin EFL teaching/learning context. The study also examines the students' opinions about the type of feedback they receive from their teacher on their written production. It is assumed in this study that an inquiry into the teachers' rationale for their response to their students' writing will help to determine their level of understanding of the role and function of feedback in the writing process, to uncover their expectations, and to make relevant suggestions that will encourage them to adopt a process approach to teaching writing despite the constraints they are confronted with in the context under consideration. It is also assumed that knowledge of the students' opinions about the feedback they receive will help to pinpoint any discrepancy between the teachers' feedback practices and learners' preferences. Basing on this knowledge, relevant suggestions will be made to help bridge the gap between these teachers' practices and their learners' expectations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Teacher Written Response to Student Writing: Significance

Teacher written feedback is defined in the literature as any comments, questions, or error corrections that are written on students' assignments (Mack, 2009). It can take a variety of forms: questions, error corrections, praises, suggestions, criticisms, and so on. According to previous research in ESL, the teacher feedback is considered as a useful tool that can be used to promote students' revision and to foster the learning-to-write process (e.g., Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hyland, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Paulus, 1999; Sommers, 1982). Because of the importance of the teacher feedback in the step to step learning-to-write process, Harmer (2000, p.261) highlights the role of the teacher as "feedback provider" and considers it as a valuable aspect, central to the process approach to teaching writing. Silver and Lee (2007) view the teacher feedback as a crucial variable in the process approach as it helps to pinpoint students' strengths and weaknesses, and helps them to be better motivated during the writing process. Alluding to the importance of the teacher written feedback, Peterson (2010) points out that it informs the student writer on the reader's reactions. Teachers, therefore, provide feedback on student writing to support students' writing development and to nurture their confidence as writers. The teacher's comments on the students' drafts inform students about the quality of their writing and its effect on the audience. Unfortunately, in some EFL teaching contexts, especially when teachers are confronted with the constraints of large classes, providing ongoing feedback to students in writing classes becomes a burden, and they resort to a product-oriented approach to teaching writing and to responding to students' written production.

B. Nature of the Teacher Written Feedback

Considering the nature of the teacher feedback, previous studies in the area have pointed to some characteristic features of effective and helpful feedback. First, it should be both criterion-based and reader-based, that is, it should tell the student writer whether or not the piece of writing has achieved the intended communication purpose. It should address not only the clarity of communication and organisation of ideas, but it should also show the student writer the effect that the writing has on the reader. Such feedback nurtures the students' confidence as writers, and increases their motivation to improve their writing (Hyland, & Hyland, 2001; Lantolf, & Pavlenko, 2001; Peterson, & McClay, 2010; Stern & Solomon, 2006). Second, effective feedback should be suggestive rather than prescriptive in order to support students' sense of ownership of their writing. Instead of taking the form of instructions and criticisms, it should offer suggestions for improvement. It should take the form of observations and open-ended questions that prompt the student writer to think about ways of improving the draft (Peterson, 2010). Third, effective and helpful feedback should be clear and easy to decode and understand, and the criteria for success should be clear to the students (Hodges, 1997; White, 2007).

C. Types of Teacher Written Feedback

With reference to the instructional purpose of the teacher's written response to students' writing, research in the area of ESL writing distinguishes between formative and summative feedback. While the former is intended to help student writers to revise their work before it is graded, the latter evaluates the quality of the finished product. No matter the instructional purpose of the teacher's written feedback, that is, whether it is formative or summative, it may have different foci (Park, 2006). It may be form-focused (focused on grammar correction), content-based (focused on quality and organisation of content), or integrative (a combination of both). With regards to this distinction, Ferris (2003) contends that in the process-oriented approach, the focus of the teacher feedback should be on content on preliminary drafts followed by a form-focused feedback on the final draft. While some studies have shown that a form-based feedback is more appreciated by students (eg., Ferris, 2004), others have revealed students' preference for a content-based feedback and an increase of their motivation (e.g., Alamis, 2010; Park, 2006; Ravichandran, 2002).

D. Students' Reactions to Teacher Written Feedback: Research Considerations

Most of the feedback research in ESL and EFL writing that has focused on examining the effect of the teacher's written comments on student writing during the learning-to-write process has considered the teacher feedback as an important tool that can be used to prompt students to revise and edit their drafts and to develop their writing skill. In this framework, some of these feedback studies have revealed that teachers' written comments on final graded compositions are ineffective as students no longer take any care of them once they got their grades (Ferris, 1997, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a; Peterson, 2010; Stern & Solomon, 2006). Therefore, it is more advantageous that learning to write in the second or foreign language class be process-oriented to enable learners to better develop the writing skill.

Early studies in the same area focused on students' perspectives on feedback and considered students' responses to teacher feedback as being very important in helping teachers develop effective feedback practices (Cohen, 1987; Ferry, 1995; Leki, 1991). Pointing to the same aspect, Hyland and Hyland (2006a) later consider students as active agents of the feedback process and suggest that their feelings be understood for the teacher feedback to produce expected effect. Other studies on students' reactions to teacher feedback have revealed that the way students respond to the feedback they get might be influenced by learners' characteristics and individual needs. With regards to this aspect, Hyland and Hyland (2006b) consider feedback as a social act involving students who actively respond to "what they perceive as valuable and useful" (p.220). An inquiry into students' expectations and views on their teacher's feedback in this study will help get a deeper understanding of their reactions.

III. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of the research is to identify the participant EFL teachers' perspectives on feedback, more specifically the rationale underlying their provision of written feedback on students' writing and their expectations. The study also attempts to compare the teachers' expectations with learners' opinions about the written feedback they receive. To reach this objective, the following research questions are considered in the study:

- What is the nature of the participant EFL teachers' written feedback?
- What are their perspectives on feedback provision?
- What do the participant EFL students think about the written feedback they receive?

A mixed method research design is used to obtain the data for this study. The rationale for selecting this research design is that an inquiry into the issue of concern through qualitative and quantitative data would help get a deeper insight into the matter and reach a thorough understanding of the research problems (Creswell, 2002). The population involved includes two categories of participants. The first category is composed of 132 secondary school 7th graders attending classes in four different classrooms in the same secondary school. They took the same test in which they were required to write a 15-line paragraph (about 150 words) about racism. They are taught by teachers A and B who constitute the second category of participants in the study. Each of them teaches in two of the classrooms. Both teachers are qualified and have respectively 17 and 9 years of EFL teaching experience. Paula and Mike are the pseudonyms used in this report to refer to them in order to keep anonymity.

The data for the study were collected through three instruments: (1) the students' graded compositions in order to identify the nature of the feedback provided; (2) a close-ended questionnaire addressed to the participant EFL students in order to gain insight into their opinions and attitudes to their teacher's feedback; (3) a semi-structured interview to each of the participant EFL teachers to elicit information about their rationale for providing written feedback on their students' writing and their expectations. The data from the teachers' written feedback on the students' writing are analysed and categorised basing on their focus (form or content), their nature (prescriptive or suggestive), and on whether or not the feedback provided is both criterion-based and reader-based. The data from the students' responses to the questionnaire are analysed using percentages. A theme analysis (Oppenheim, 1992; Seidman, 1998) is carried out on the interview data gathered from the two teachers in order to identify the trends in their opinions about the provision of written feedback in EFL writing.

IV. RESULTS

A. *The Nature of the Participant EFL Teachers' Feedback*

Paula provided written feedback on 68 written texts that she marked. A total of 795 feedback points were collected from those marked texts yielding an average of 11.69 feedback points per student text. Her feedback is 100% form-focused as it is concerned with errors related to the clarity of ideas and to the accurate use of language (grammar, word choice, word order, and spelling). Paula's error feedback strategies consist in underlining and circling identified errors as well as in providing correction of some of them. Her overall feedback provision is criterion-based. It is carried out through the use of codes that relate to the assessment criteria she considered in order to address the following areas: accuracy, organisation, context, and text type. These codes correspond to the assessment criteria outlined in the EFL curriculum in Benin, and are commonly used by EFL teachers to assess student writing. They are labelled as follows: RC: respect of context; RLO: respect of logical organisation, GVSP: grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation. However, although the codes and the grade points she attributed to each give the student writer an idea as to whether or not the text produced relates to the topic proposed and to the type of text required, they provide no explicit clue for revision. The student writers cannot figure out why each code has been given the grade point written next to it in the margin. No additional marginal or terminal written comments are provided to help them to understand why each code is worth the grade point attributed to it and to think about ways of improving the quality of the content. Moreover, Paula's feedback provides no information about the teacher-reader's feelings and impressions about the quality of the content of the marked texts, and their overall effect on the reader.

As for Mike, his feedback practices are almost the same as Paula's. A total of 716 feedback points were collected from the 64 written texts he marked, giving an average of 11.18 per student text. As is the case with Paula, Mike's feedback is mostly form-focused as 98.32% of it deals with accuracy and clarity. He too reacted to errors using the same error feedback strategies as Paula (underlining, circling, and provision of sparse error corrections). He also used the same codes as Paula. However, contrary to Paula who provided no marginal or terminal written comments on her students' marked texts, Mike gave terminal written comments on 11 out of the 64 texts that he marked. Twelve feedback points in the form of question and statement are included in the feedback points gathered from his marked texts, which corresponds to 1.68 % of the 716 feedback points collected. Of the 11 marked texts that include written comments in the feedback provided, 10 show a single written comment, while only one text shows two comments. The written comments provided relate mostly to the content of the texts, except for one that addresses grammatical accuracy "*adjectives do not take 's' in English*". The other comments that address content are mostly suggestive ("*But what can be done to abolish racial attitudes?*"; "*What do you suggest for eradication?*"; "*But you said nothing about your own position*"; "*How should people behave?*"). They are in the form of open-ended question or statement of opinion to prompt the students to think about ways of improving the content of their writing. The table below presents the summary of information about both teachers' feedback practices.

TABLE I
THE NATURE OF THE PARTICIPANT EFL TEACHERS' WRITTEN FEEDBACK

Focus of feedback	Paula (%)	Mike (%)
Error feedback	100	98.32
Grammar and lexical accuracy	83.57	71.20
Clarity of sentence structure	16.43	27.12
Written comments	00	01.68
Organisation of content	00	00
Quality of content	00	01.54
Others	00	00.14
Total	100	100

B. The Teachers' Perspectives on Feedback Provision

To have insight into the participant EFL teachers' perspectives on feedback provision on student writing, a theme analysis has been carried out on the interview data elicited from them. The following major themes emerged from these data as being representative of their opinions about feedback provision in EFL writing: feedback provision is an important practice, feedback is a useful tool to develop accuracy, context-related constraints hinder the provision of effective feedback, written comments are very important, and students' effective use of the teacher feedback is part of the learning-to-write process.

First, both teachers think that feedback provision is a very important practice in EFL writing. While Paula considers it as a valuable awareness raising technique that prompts students to revise their writing, Mike perceives it as a strategy to increase learners' interest in writing as well as their knowledge about it. Each of them contends as follows: *"I think it is a valuable exercise. I should do that to make students aware of the different types of mistakes they have made in their writing in order to help them improve it."* (Paula). *"Giving them feedback can help them be more interested in writing. I think that surely to improve students' writing, feedback will help a lot to increase their knowledge about how to put their ideas in good English."* (Mike).

Second, they perceive feedback as a useful tool. They believe that it helps learners to improve their knowledge about the language and to develop accuracy in writing. Paula confessed that she provides feedback to draw her learners' attention to the mistakes in their writing. Mike considers it as a way of increasing learners' knowledge about good English. Their perceptions of the function of the teacher feedback translate into practice as they both focus on form in their feedback to students' writing. They consider that learners' mastery of the rules of accuracy, of the mechanisms of sentence construction and sentence structure in English would enable them to perform well on English writing tasks. When asked to provide the rationale for this focus, they answered as follows: *"Students must follow grammatical rules to write correctly. I focus mostly on mistakes."* (Paula). *"I check if the sentences are meaningful and grammatically correct. I focus on grammar and spelling to help them master the language."* (Mike).

Third, in their rationale for a form-focused feedback, both teachers alluded to some context-related constraints such as recurrent strikes, the insufficient amount of time allocated to the teaching of EFL in secondary schools, large class size, and the resulting large number of students' copies to grade. They both consider these constraints as hindrances to the provision of effective feedback. They expressed their concerns in the following words: *"I focus mostly on mistakes because of time. There are many copies to mark, and the amount of time assigned for EFL is not sufficient."* (Mike). *"There are many factors that prevent us from responding to student writing the way we should. One of them is the lack of time because of the strikes that often reduce the academic year."* (Paula)

Fourth, though in practice both teachers provide a type of feedback that is mostly form-focused, they are aware of the usefulness of the teacher written comments on students' writing. Although they confessed that they do not usually provide written comments because of the constraints they alluded to, they think that such comments are very helpful and important. Here is what they said about this aspect of the teacher feedback:

I don't usually give them because they are time-consuming. Most of the time, we have large classes and the marked papers should be brought back at a given date, so to meet the deadline, we are obliged not to write too much on the papers to save time. Written comments are very important and helpful for learners. They can go through these comments again and again to improve their writing. We need to have limited number of students in our classrooms to make our feedback effective. (Paula)

As for Mike, he contends as follows:

They are too many in the classrooms. You see, if I should write comments on each student's copy, it is too much time. I sometimes do this when the student has not written about the topic given, or when he has copied sentences from the reading passage. I put comments only when it is necessary. I wonder if the learners read them. But I think that normally the teacher's comments should help learners to improve their writing, and this is very important. Unfortunately, most of them look at the grade and that's all. They don't care about the comments (Mike).

Fifth and finally, both teachers hold the view that students' effective use of the teacher's feedback is part of their learning to write. They expect students to consider the feedback they receive and to take it into account when dealing with subsequent writing tasks. Here is what they said: *"I expect them to ask me questions about the feedback they got and to integrate it to their writing in the future."* (Mike). *"When I give them feedback on their writing, I want them to take it into account so that in the future they should avoid those kinds of mistakes."* (Paula).

C. The Students' Opinions and Attitudes to Their Teachers' Feedback

1. The students' impressions of their teachers' feedback

The majority of both teachers' students hold negative impressions of their teachers' feedback. As far as Paula's students are concerned, about two thirds of them (64.71%) are critical of their teacher's feedback. They consider it to be discouraging (27.94%), confusing (22.05%), overwhelming (10.29%), and useless (04.41%). The remaining students (35.29%) are favourable to it and find it clear (14.70%), useful (19.12%), or both (01.47%). Similarly, about two thirds (65.63%) of Mike's students are critical of the feedback they receive with 23.44% who find it discouraging, 18.75% confusing, 15.62% useless, and 07.81% who think that it is both confusing and overwhelming. On the other hand, the other students (34.37%) hold positive impressions of the teacher's feedback. While 10.93% of them consider it to be clear, 07.81% think it is useful, and 15.62% marked both response options.

TABLE II
THE STUDENTS' IMPRESSIONS OF THEIR TEACHERS' FEEDBACK

Nature of students' impressions	Paula's students			Mike's students		
	Selected responses	Numbers & percentages	Total	Selected responses	Numbers & percentages	Total
Positive	Clear	10 (14.70%)	24 (35.29%)	clear	07 (10.94%)	22 (34.37%)
	Useful	13 (19.12%)		Useful	05 (07.81%)	
	Clear & useful	01 (01.47%)		Clear & useful	10 (15.62%)	
Negative	Discouraging	19 (27.94%)	44 (64.71%)	Discouraging	15 (23.44%)	42 (65.63%)
	Confusing	15 (22.06%)		Confusing	12 (18.75%)	
	Useless	03 (04.41%)		Useless	10 (15.62%)	
	Overwhelming	07 (10.29%)		Confusing & overwhelming	05 (07.81%)	
Total			68 (100%)			64 (100%)

2 The students' feelings about their teachers' feedback

Feelings of dissatisfaction appear to be the options selected by 86 (65.15%) of the 132 students taught by both teachers, especially those who hold negative impressions of the feedback they get. While *frustration* is the response option selected by 52 of them (39.39%), *lost* is the feeling marked by 33 (25%), and both options by one student (0.75%). Among the 46 (34.85%) students who are favourable to the feedback they get, 26 (19.69%) are interested in reading it, and the remaining twenty (15.15%) respondents selected satisfaction and eagerness to improve their writing as being their feelings about their teacher's feedback. Table III provides detailed information about the feelings of the students taught by each of the two teachers.

TABLE III
THE STUDENTS' FEELINGS ABOUT THEIR TEACHER'S FEEDBACK

Students' impressions	Paula's students			Mike's students		
	Selected responses	Numbers & percentages	Total	Selected responses	Numbers & percentages	Total
Positive	Interested in reading it	14 (20.59%)	24 (35.29%)	Interested in reading it	12 (18.75%)	22 (34.37%)
	Satisfied and eager to improve	10 (14.70%)		satisfied	05 (07.81%)	
				Eager to improve	05 (07.81%)	
Negative	frustrated	19 (27.94%)	44 (64.71%)	frustrated	33 (51.56%)	42 (65.63%)
	Lost	24 (35.29%)		Lost	09 (14.06%)	
	Lost and frustrated	01 (01.47%)				
Total			68 (100%)			64 (100%)

3. The students' reactions to their teachers' feedback

Twenty-three (33.82%) of Paula's students discard their paper after reading the mark. Five (07.35%) ask for clarification after reading the teacher's feedback, and five (07.35%) others take care of the mistakes that are easy to correct. The remaining thirty-five (51.47%) attempt to approach revision; 12 (17.65%) on their own taking into account the teacher's suggestions, and 23 (33.82%) with the help of their home tutor. As for Mike, thirty (46.88%) of his students discard their paper after reading their mark. Eight (12.50%) ask for clarifications, five (07.81%) correct the mistakes that are easy to correct, nine (14.06%) attempt to revise by themselves taking into account the teacher's suggestions for correction, and twelve (18.75%) undertake the revision work with the help of their home tutor. It should be noticed that only 42.43% of the students involved in the study attempt to revise their writing. Half of them (50%) content with reading the teacher's feedback, and the remaining 07.57% students focus on minor error correction.

TABLE IV
THE STUDENTS' REACTIONS TO THEIR TEACHER'S FEEDBACK

Response options	Paula	Mike	Total
I read the mark and discard the paper	23 (33.82%)	30 (46.88%)	53 (40.15%)
I read the mark and the comments and I discard the paper	00 (00%)	00 (00%)	00 (00%)
I read the mark and the comments and I ask for clarifications	05 (07.35%)	08 (12.50%)	13 (09.85%)
I correct the mistakes that are easy to correct	05 (07.35%)	05 (07.81%)	10 (07.57%)
I revise taking into account the teacher's suggestions	12 (17.65%)	09 (14.06%)	21 (15.91%)
I revise with the help of my home tutor	23 (33.82%)	12 (18.75%)	35 (26.52%)
Total	68 (100%)	64 (100%)	132 (100%)

4. The students' preferences

a. The students' preferred type of written feedback

The participant EFL students' responses to the item of the questionnaire relating to their preferred type of teacher written feedback reveal that most of them are in favour of a comprehensive, explicit, and informative teacher feedback. More than two thirds of Paula's students (72.05%) expressed preference for a written feedback that shows the grade, the teacher's suggestions for error correction, and written comments on the content. None of them wants to get the grade only. Similarly, none of Mike's 64 students showed interest in getting a written feedback limited to the grade. More than two thirds of them (67.19%) rather expressed interest in the teacher's reaction to the quality of their writing through the provision an error feedback and written comments in addition to the grade.

TABLE V
THE STUDENTS' PREFERRED TYPE OF WRITTEN FEEDBACK

Response options	Paula	Mike	Total
By giving a mark only	00 (00%)	00 (00%)	00 (00%)
By suggesting error correction only	04 (05.88)	08 (12.50%)	12 (09.09%)
By providing written comments on the content only	00 (00%)	02 (03.12%)	02 (01.51%)
By giving a mark and suggesting error correction	03 (04.41%)	04 (06.25%)	07 (05.30%)
By giving a mark and providing written comments on the content	02 (02.94%)	05 (07.81%)	07 (05.30%)
By suggesting error correction and providing written comments on the content	10 (14.70%)	02 (03.12%)	12 (09.09%)
By giving a mark, suggesting error correction, and providing written comments on the content	49 (72.05%)	43 (67.19%)	92 (69.70%)
Total	68 (100%)	64 (100%)	132 (100%)

b. The students' preferred type of error feedback

The majority of both teachers' students (70.45%) expect a thorough error feedback as they want correction suggestions for all errors. Only a few of them (29.55%) would like to receive an error feedback that is selective and focused on a few errors, which indicates the respondent students' reliance on the teacher's input for correction.

TABLE VI
THE STUDENTS' PREFERRED TYPE OF ERROR FEEDBACK

Response options	Paula	Mike	Total
By suggesting correction of all errors	46 (67.65%)	47 (73.44%)	93 (70.45%)
By suggesting correction of some errors	22 (32.35%)	17 (26.56%)	39 (29.55%)
Total	68 (100%)	64 (100%)	132 (100%)

c. The students' preferred teacher's suggestions for error correction

The students' reliance on the teacher for correction is obvious as the large majority of them do not want a type of error feedback that is restricted to indicating errors with a circling or an underlining. They also expect additional hints such as a code and/or correction of the indicated error. It should be noticed that 105 (79.55%) of them are interested in getting an overt correction of their errors by the teacher.

TABLE VII
THE STUDENTS' PREFERRED TEACHER'S SUGGESTIONS FOR ERROR CORRECTION

Response options	Paula	Mike	Total
By circling/underlining errors	02 (02.94%)	02 (03.12%)	04 (03.03%)
By circling/underlining errors and providing correction	18 (26.47%)	07 (10.94%)	25 (18.94%)
By circling/underlining and using a code to indicate the type of error	11(16.18%)	12 (18.75%)	23 (17.42%)
By circling/underlining, using a code to indicate the type of error, and providing correction	37(54.41%)	43 (67.19%)	80 (60.61%)
Total	68 (100%)	64 (100%)	132 (100%)

d. The students' preferred focus for the teacher's error feedback

An item of the questionnaire required the respondents to mark the aspects that they think their teacher's feedback should focus on. The results reveal that grammar is the area of interest of both teachers' students as it is the response option marked by all of them (100%). Forty-seven students (35.61%) marked it as their single choice, and the other 85 students (64.39%) added other response options to it. The information in table VIII presents the ranking of the options basing on the number of respondents who marked them.

TABLE VIII
THE STUDENTS' PREFERRED FOCUS FOR THE TEACHER'S ERROR FEEDBACK

Response options	Paula	Mike	Total
Grammar	68 (100%)	64 (100%)	132 (100%)
Spelling	24 (35.29 %)	28 (43.75%)	52 (39.39%)
Vocabulary	18 (26.47%)	20 (31.25%)	38 (28.78%)
Punctuation	15 (22.05%)	16 (25.00%)	31 (23.48%)

Grammar is ranked first in the list as it is marked by all the students (100%), followed by spelling (39.39%), vocabulary (28.78%), and punctuation (23.48%).

e. The students' preferred focus for the teacher's written comments

The data gathered for this item of the questionnaire reveal that the majority of both teachers' students prefer to receive a thorough and constructive teacher feedback on the content of their composition as 78.03 % of them would like the teacher written comments to focus on both positive and negative aspects of their writing.

TABLE IX
THE STUDENTS' PREFERRED FOCUS FOR THE TEACHER'S WRITTEN COMMENTS

Response options	Paula	Mike	Total
Negative aspects	05 (07.35%)	08 (12.50%)	13 (09.85%)
Positive aspects	09 (13.24%)	07 (10.94%)	16 (12.12%)
Both aspects	54 (79.41%)	49 (76.56%)	103 (78.03%)
Total	68 (100%)	64 (100%)	132 (100%)

V. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Though the generalizability of the findings of this study is limited to the participants involved, they helped to get a deeper insight into the issue related to the provision of feedback on EFL students' written production in Beninese secondary school EFL classes.

First, about two-thirds (65.15%) of the participant EFL students expressed their inability to make sense of the feedback on their papers. They found it difficult to decode and to understand. Some of them even consider it overwhelming. Regarding this issue, the study suggests that teachers take into account students' language ability when responding to their writing, and use language that is accessible to them in order to enable them to get most benefit from the feedback provided. Students will gain more from a focused and selective feedback than from a comprehensive and overwhelming one. The teacher may respond to selected error patterns in order to make learners feel like undertaking the revision process or taking into account suggestions made for future writing. The teacher's choice of an effective feedback strategy will help students develop interest in making sense of the teacher's marginal and terminal comments, error codes and corrections provided for errors. As far as written comments are concerned, they too should be put in a clear and easy language for students to understand.

Second, the findings reveal that the feedback provided by both teachers is error-focused and highlights the weaknesses of students' writing. According to Straub (2000), a comprehensive negative error feedback overwhelms students and makes them lose interest and self-confidence in improving their writing. The results indicate that 34 (25.75%) of them expressed discouragement because of a negative feedback. Learners' motivation should rather be enhanced through encouraging feedback. The teacher should praise students' efforts. He should provide a constructive feedback, one that shows the positive aspects and areas that need improvement in the students' production. The participant students are in favour of a constructive feedback as a large majority of them (78.03%) expressed the desire for receiving a teacher written feedback that will consider both positive and negative aspects of their writing. With

regard to the effectiveness of the teacher's feedback, researchers have pointed out that individual learners' characteristics constitute a crucial variable to consider in feedback provision in order to maximize benefits (e.g., Guenette, 2007; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001).

Third, the participant EFL students also expressed their desire for reading a word of appraisal from the teacher on the content of their writing. They want to know the effect of their writing on the teacher. Beside the teacher's feedback on errors, they want more information about the content of their written production. More than two-thirds of the students taught by each of the two participant EFL teachers expressed preference for a written feedback that shows the grade, the teacher's suggestions for error correction, and written comments on the content. It is important that the teacher figure out the students' preferences and provide the type of feedback that would be most helpful to them at any given time during the learning-to-write process. Despite context-related constraints such as large class size, the insufficient amount of time, and a product-oriented evaluation system, which favor the participant teachers' provision of a summative feedback in the school investigated, the teachers should use adequate strategies to promote students' effective use of the feedback they receive in future writing.

Fourth, the study has revealed that more than one-third of the participants EFL students (40.15%) hardly pay any attention to the feedback on their writing and quickly discard their paper right after reading their mark. These students are naturally more interested in their grades and do not see any point in carrying out the work of revision as the teacher feedback is provided on the finished work. To get students more involved in the learning-to-write process, at least in using the teachers' suggestions to improve future writing, teachers should inform them about the assessment criteria as well as the meaning of the different codes they use in their error-feedback. They may also allow the students to participate in the development of the assessment criteria.

Finally, many other alternatives are available for teachers for responding to learners' written production in EFL classes. Due to the non-existence of adequate technology in most secondary school settings in Benin, which may make the use of audio or computer-based feedback impossible, the teacher can get the students themselves involved in the work of feedback provision through peer response sessions under the teacher's guidance and supervision, or through verbal response in teacher-student conferences.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research invite EFL teachers to consider writing as a skill that needs to be taught through the use of adequate and effective techniques. Within this framework, the provision of formative feedback with the view to providing input and impetus for revision should be considered as an important part of the teaching learners to write process. More importantly, the type of feedback that teachers provide should not only be informative, but it should also take into account learners' background knowledge, motivation, level of learning, and preferences.

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS

- 1- How would you explain your vision of feedback provision on your students' writing?
- 2- Could you please describe your feedback practice?
- 3- How do you determine the content of your feedback?
- 4- What aspects of your students' writing do you focus on? Why ?
- 5- Explain the strategies that you use in providing feedback on errors in your students' writing.
- 6- How do you perceive the provision of written comments?
- 7- Do you provide written comments on the students' writing? Why ?
- 8- What are your expectations in providing written comments on your students' writing?
- 9- What do you do to check students' understanding of your feedback?
- 10- What do you do to make students take your feedback into consideration?

APPENDIX B. QUESTIONNAIRE TO STUDENTS

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information related to your impressions, feelings, and opinions about your teacher's feedback on your writing. Thank you very much for taking a few minutes to complete it. (Circle the letter(s) corresponding to your response(s).

1. What is your impression of your teacher's feedback? (You can select more than one response)
 - a- It is clear (easy to read and understandable)
 - b- It is useful (it shows positive points and areas that need improvement)
 - c- It is discouraging (it shows only negative aspects and criticisms)
 - d- It is confusing (not clear, difficult to decode/to understand)
 - e- It is overwhelming (it contains too many feedback points)
 - f- It is useless (it offers no suggestion for revision)
2. How do you usually feel about your teacher's feedback on your writing? (You can select more than one response)
 - a- Frustrated
 - b- Lost (don't know how to revise the composition)

- c- Interested in reading it
 - d- Satisfied
 - e- Eager to improve my writing
3. What do you do when you get your teacher's feedback on your writing? (You should select only one response)
 - a- I only read the grade and discard the paper
 - b- I read the grade and the comments, and I discard the paper
 - c- I read the grade and the comments, and I ask for clarification
 - d- I correct the mistakes that are easy to correct
 - e- I revise my writing taking into account the teacher's suggestions
 - f- I improve my writing with the help of my home tutor
 4. How would you like your teacher to respond to your composition? (You should select only one response)
 - a- By giving a mark only
 - b- By suggesting error correction only
 - c- By providing written comments on the content only
 - d- By giving a mark and suggesting error correction
 - e- By giving a mark and providing written comments on the content
 - f- By suggesting error correction and providing written comments on the content
 - g- By giving a mark, suggesting error correction, and providing written comments on the content
 5. How would you like your teacher to react to errors in your composition? (You should select only one response)
 - a- By suggesting correction of all errors
 - b- By suggesting correction of some errors
 6. How would you like your teacher to suggest error correction in your composition? (You should select only one response)
 - a- By circling/underlining errors
 - b- By circling/underlining errors and providing correction
 - c- By circling/underlining and using a code to indicate the type of error
 - d- By circling/underlining, using a code to indicate the type of error, and providing correction
 7. What type (s) of errors would you like your teacher to focus on in his/her feedback? (You can select more than one response)
 - a- Grammar
 - b- Vocabulary
 - c- Spelling
 - d- Punctuation
 8. What would you like your teacher's written comments to focus on? (You should select only one response)
 - a- Negative aspects
 - b- Positive aspects
 - c- Both aspects

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