The Perception of Female Saudi English Students of the Relative Value of Giving Feedback on Academic Writing through Conferencing

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ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on feedback-based writing conferences that involve feedback sessions with the teacher in a more dialogic and collaborative atmosphere to respond to students' writing. The rationale behind eliciting students' views and preferences regarding one-on-one and group FBWCs stems from the importance of fostering effective collaboration between students and their teachers using the learners' preferred approaches of critical and constructive discussions. Three research questions were developed to guide the mixed methods study, which focused on students' perceptions, their preferences concerning individual or group FBWCs, and their suggestions for better implementation of FBWCs in foundational academic writing courses. The study's participants were 77 first-year female students majoring in English. All the students responded to an online survey, and nine of them voluntarily participated in semi-structured interviews. Statistical analyses of quantitative data were performed by SPSS, using a descriptive analysis approach in addition to using paired t tests. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse qualitative data. Findings revealed students' positive views about the usefulness of FBWCs for their academic writing development. The students' responses indicated no significant differences between their preferences for individual or group FBWCs; however, students emphasized their needs for adequate and meaningful feedback in collaborative and motivating environments.

Keywords: *Academic writing, Writing feedback, EFL/ESL college students, Teacher feedback, Peer feedback, Feedback-based writing conferences, Sociocultural theory.*

Highlights of this paper

- The present study focuses on feedback-based writing conferences that involve feedback sessions with the teacher in a more dialogic and collaborative atmosphere to respond to students' writing.
- The study's participants were 77 first-year female students majoring in English.
- Findings revealed students' positive views about the usefulness of FBWCs for their academic writing development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present study investigates teacher-student feedback conferences, in both individual and collaborative settings with colleagues in small groups, from students' perspectives. Writing conferences involve discussions, negotiations, explanations and suggestions for improving writing in a sociable environment. Students' perceptions are elicited quantitively through their responses to an online survey about the effectiveness of teacher feedback as well as semi-structured interviews are conducted to strengthen the quantitative data.

The sociocultural theory (SCT) of teaching L2 writing provides the framework for this study. Therefore, the present study explores the perceptions of female students of the European Languages Faculty through the SCT of teaching writing. The literature review explores previous studies that have investigated the implementation of EFL/ESL writing feedback conferences, as well as the effectiveness of its application on learners' writing achievements. An explanation of the methodology for the study includes details about the participants, methods and procedures. Finally, major trends are interpreted and connected to previous studies in the discussion chapter, then, limitations and implications to EFL teaching are highlighted to provide more insights into EFL academic writing.

1.1. Feedback-Based Writing Conferences

Competence in EFL literacy is one of the key requirements for enrolment in English studies. Most English departments in Saudi universities require students to achieve high scores on the admission test administered to new registrants at the beginning of every academic semester. To further improve students' English proficiency, the newly registered students take two-level compulsory courses in language skills, reading, writing, listening, and speaking during their first year as English majors. These extensive courses aim to develop English students' language and literacy skills in the English academic community. The present investigation focuses on writing courses by exploring and evaluating the perceptions and expectations of students on the efficacy of Feedback-Based Writing Conferences (FBWC) as an effective, yet uncommon, approach in the Saudi context.

Conferencing in the present context of the study refers to a type of face-to-face oral feedback offered by writing teachers to EFL students. In feedback-based conferences, the teacher arranges regular sessions with the students to respond to their writing in a more dialogic and collaborative atmosphere. Conferencing with students individually or in small groups involves evaluating the writing process, discussing and exchanging ideas, and most importantly, cultivating friendly relationships between teachers (evaluators) and other students (peers). Feedback-based conferences can make learning experiences more personalised and hence, more effective (Young and Miller, 2004; Nicholas and Paatsch, 2014). The conferencing method can be an effective tool for identifying students' writing struggles that might not be detected in the classroom especially with large numbers of students.

1.2. Significance and Aims of the Study

The educational system in Saudi Arabia faces powerful changes in various dimensions, such as instructional methods, learning materials and policies. The vast modernisation endeavours in Saudi education are aligned with the 2030 Vision, proposed by the Saudi government with the aim to transform the country into a globalised,

productive, and innovative nation. One of the main educational goals of the 2030 Vision centres on learners' development and student-led approaches to teaching. Considering students' needs, interests and preferences regarding writing feedback and aligning instructional approaches with students' requirements and anticipated outcomes can maximise their achievements and motivation. The rationale behind eliciting students' views, experiences and preferences regarding one-on-one and group FBWCs stems from the importance of fostering effective collaboration between students and their teachers using the learners' preferred approaches of critical and constructive discussions. Identifying students' opinions on and their linguistic and personal needs for FBWCs is a key factor, according to SCT that will directly influence teachers' instructional practices in writing courses.

The following research questions about students' perspectives guide this study:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of individual and group feedback-based writing conferences?

2. Which type of environment—individual or group—do students tend to prefer for receiving feedback?

3. From the students' perspectives, how can feedback-based writing conferences best be implemented to improve the learners' academic writing levels?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Teacher-Student Writing Conferences as a Mixed Feedback Approach

Being academically competent in foundational writing stages helps ensure successful futures for students, especially EFL students, as the issue of language proficiency might interfere with the process of writing development. One way to enhance learning outcomes in EFL college context is through the accurate predetermination of students' needs, struggles, and preferred learning styles. In the current context, feedback is a key element through which most learners progress and achievements depend on the selection of feedback methods, which should be carefully chosen. The concept of scaffolded feedback was first suggested by Vygotsky's SCT and it stresses the importance of teachers providing assistance through scaffolding (Barnard and Campbell, 2005; Rassaei, 2014). Teacher feedback, whether oral or written and conducted either individually or collaboratively, is the primary type of writing feedback involving scaffolding, evaluation, and discussions with the learners. It is found that students who regularly received timely and constructive feedback from their teachers achieved more academic growth than others receiving less informative and inconsistent feedback (Yang *et al.*, 2014).

EFL students usually receive oral feedback through more collaborative and interactional dialogues with the teacher, which simplifies the process of communication and comprehension of different writing errors to students (Marzban and Sarjami, 2014). Therefore, FBWCs represent a significant form of feedback that contributes to academic writing development (DeMott, 2006; Ewert, 2009; Anast-May *et al.*, 2011; Atai and Alipour, 2012). According to Bayraktar (2012) conferencing is defined as "response sessions, assisted performance, face-to-face interaction"; one-to-one or group teaching; or "conversation about students' papers and meaningful contact" (p. 709). Conferencing can be valuable and advantageous when learners reflect on their own learning process and written texts can be critiqued by teachers (Nosratinia and Nikpanjeh, 2015).

Complementing the basic form of teacher-student feedback conferencing with the inclusion of peer evaluation in a more collaborative environment has been examined in several contexts (Hyland and Hyland, 2006; Nosratinia and Nikpanjeh, 2015). Nicholas and Paatsch (2014) describe teacher-student conferencing as an efficient avenue for participants, teachers, and students that allows teachers to monitor feedback receivers, the students, and their understanding of identified errors and to provide them with further assistance when affective factors negatively influence students' writing. Eckstein (2013) considers writing conferences a beneficial method for teachers and

students in which teachers can comprehend the intended meaning articulated in students' texts. Similarly, students can be instructed on how to revise their texts and gain insights on the readers' reactions to their writing while receiving the feedback.

Some previous studies attempted to observe the roles of teachers and students during conferencing and analyse their impact on students' development of EFL writing and other essential skills (Ewert, 2009; Abdulkhaleq *et al.*, 2013; Nicholas and Paatsch, 2014; Nosratinia and Nikpanjeh, 2015; Yeh, 2016). Abdulkhaleq *et al.* (2013) observed writing teachers and students during conferencing and found that the teacher dominates most of the conversations and that the lack of student involvement in the discussions is due to several factors. Generally, EFL students tend to prefer to play the role of silent receivers because of their low English competence and their high levels of anxiety when meeting with the teacher. As noted by Abdulkhaleq *et al.* (2013) when EFL students pass their turns in discussion to their teacher or peers, they are observed to experience high levels of anxiety which hinders them from being fluent participants. Yeh (2016) however, surveyed EFL learners and found that most participants expressed their preference for teacher-directed oral feedback to either peer-correction or self-correction.

In addition, the proper implementation of FBWCs where all participants play vital roles in discussions and where reflective conversations are directed and scaffolded by the teacher is more likely to a build motivational environment for receiving writing feedback. On the other hand, students' anxiety could be the result of low English proficiency and limited opportunities for active participation and reflection during conferencing. Eckstein (2013) attempts to analyse the factors behind students' anxiety towards writing conferences. His results indicate that students with low proficiency prefer less collaborative feedback interactions. In contrast, more proficient students express their intentions to be part of collaborative FBWCs (Eckstein, 2013).

Additionally, teachers' attitudes during feedback sessions with EFL students can influence the atmosphere of the conference and directly impact students' performance in writing. Results show that strong understanding and a good relationship between the teacher and students can benefit students' written production while the lack of rapport and friendliness among participants leads to low achievement (Abdulkhaleq *et al.*, 2013; Mochizuki, 2018). Mochizuki states that the teacher-student relationship is vital in the conferencing method of feedback as it constitutes the main mediation for writing feedback and learning.

2.2. Perceptions on FBWCs

Some studies in the literature are built mainly on teachers' perceptions, experiences, and analyses of their roles aside from the impact on students' EFL writing. For example, Liu (2009) paper studies students' and teachers' perceptions of participants' roles in conferencing, mainly that of the teacher, and analyses their discourse and its influence on EFL students. Research on FBWCs is relatively limited. Studies focusing on students' views of the practice are even rarer. Most of the existing research on students' views of conferencing compare various feedback methods in the writing classroom instead of investigating the FBWCs method itself from learners' viewpoints (Yeh, 2016). However, contemporary EFL instructional approaches advocate the application of backward methods of teaching where the design of EFL courses begins with thorough analysis of students' needs (Richards, 2013). Moreover, the practice of EFL writing is generally considered a personalised activity which makes analyses of students' perceptions and experiences more crucial in designing effective FBWCs.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

Effective teaching approaches should have reliable theoretical foundations to support and guide instructional practices. Several theories related to ELT that can be found in the literature can be adopted by teachers to deliver

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more structured and theoretically based lessons. Adopting Vygotsky's SCT of English teaching entails delivering lessons through social and interactional activities involving both students and teachers. In SCT, collaborations and interactions are linked with higher mental processes (VanPatten and Williams, 2014). Interaction, a key factor in this theory, is significantly associated with higher mental processes. The topic of teacher dominance and scaffolding is referred to as "the most frequently used theoretical construct for examining writing conferences" (DeMott, 2006). In L2 teaching studies and related research, feedback from teachers is considered the major type of human mediation available in the social and educational environments to offer guidance and assistance in distinct ways. When learners participate collaboratively, either in small groups or in one-on-one settings with the teacher, they will successfully internalise negotiated knowledge on L2 skills.

2.4. Gap and Context of the Study

While the above studies have contributed information on the effectiveness of teachers' feedback for EFL writing and provided some models for examining EFL student performances, more investigations are needed to thoroughly understand students' needs, experiences, and perception of effective FBWCs. It is essential to further investigate students' perceptions of the writing feedback offered during teacher-student conferences in order to improve EFL learning processes for both teachers and learners. To address gaps in the literature, the current research explores the perceptions of English major students during their first-year in the English department on the efficiency of writing feedback delivered to them in conferences with their teachers, by illuminating the learners' suggestions and experiences.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Paradigm

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design has been employed to accomplish the study's goals. Researchers in human and scientific studies tend to follow perspectives that allow them to investigate issues properly as the issues relate to the researchers' worldviews; the problems are examined in ways that stay consistent with the researchers' beliefs and the beliefs of their academic community. In other words, selected paradigms or worldviews consist of beliefs about the realities and philosophical underpinnings of the world that are compatible with each researcher's own belief system and those of the scientific field to which the researcher belongs (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). The philosophical framework behind the present mixed-methods study is the pragmatic paradigm. Pragmatists use diverse approaches to derive knowledge and support the multiple realities of social phenomena. In the present study, the employment of a closed ended questionnaire allows for initial understanding and identification of students' attitudes towards FBWCs which leads to generalization of results (Creswell, 2014). Analysing the qualitative data obtained from the interviews helps generate the implicit and unpredictable results behind students' responses to the survey and provide suggestions on how to improve the quality of FBWCs.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

Systematic random sampling is used to achieve high external validity that can allow generalization of results. As probability sampling requires a sampling frame, or a list of the whole population, the English language departments on the Al-Sulaymaniyah campus provided me with first-year students' data to use for randomly distributing the questionnaire. Another technique used to select participants for the qualitative method is based on a nested sampling design. From this sub-sample additional data was gathered to develop a further understanding of the information obtained from the quantitative tool (Riazi and Candlin, 2014). The total intended sample was 110

female KAU students. However, only 77 students responded to the questionnaire and 9 students were chosen for the semi-structured interviews. The mean (M) of the participants' age was 23 years with a standard deviation (SD) of six, and a median of 21. Figure 1 shows the frequency of each GPA category represented in the bar plot below. The students are registered in writing courses, which are compulsory courses, in the first and second semester of their English major.
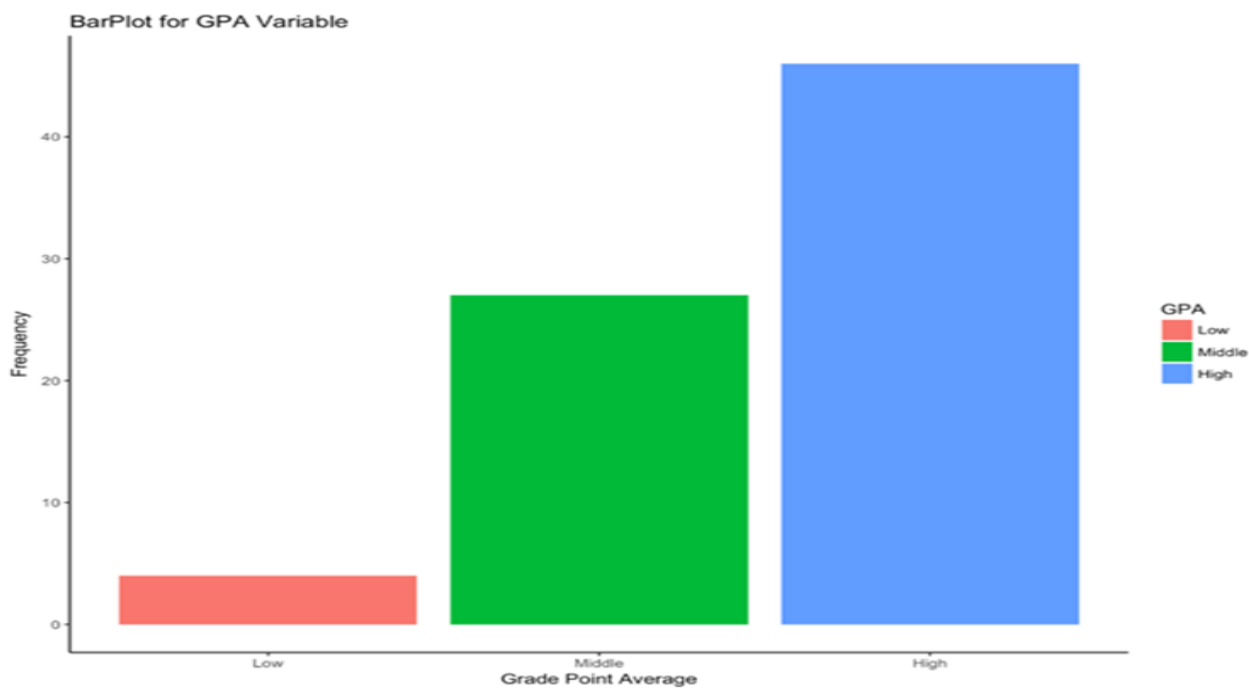

Figure-1. Frequency of each GPA category.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

3.3.1. Questionnaire

To better explore and understand students' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with FBWCs, a closed-ended questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data. An online survey was distributed to collect data to measure the perception of female Saudi-English students of the relative value of writing feedback through conferencing. The survey consisted of 27 items: two demographic items (age and GPA) and 25 items to measure the effectiveness of FBWCs. The questionnaire was distributed through two writing instructors who encouraged their students to participate, also, through sending it to first-year students group on WhatsApp and via their email. The survey took approximately 10 days in the middle of 2019 February to be completed. The quantitative data is analysed using SPSS software and displayed and interpreted using the descriptive approach.

3.3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement the questionnaire with the aim of enhancing understanding, deepening interpretation, and revealing unpredictable underlying answers on the topic. The interviews were conducted in Arabic on the phone based at the participants' convenience. The interviews were audio-recorded, and it took approximately 30 minutes to interview each student. The interview questions were developed and sequenced based on Bloom's Taxonomy's action verbs as shown in Figure 5. The data was transcribed in Arabic, then translated and analysed in English. The qualitative data is analysed using NVIVO

software based on the thematic coding approach which facilitates the data-gathering and theme-generation processes.

3.3.3. Validity and Reliability

Pilot testing of the survey was carried out before actual distribution. The pilot testing involved expert judgment and an internal consistency testto increase content validity and the effectiveness of the items and to minimize reliability errors (Mackey and Gass, 2005). To increase the validity of the questionnaire, five assistant professors in Applied Linguistics reviewed the questionnaire for clarity and suitability against the developed research questions and aims. The reviewers' suggestions and comments were considered, and the questions were edited accordingly. Subsequently, 40 students from the target population were randomly selected for pilot testing to check the readability and the extent of students' understanding of the questions. This test indicated that the questionnaire appeared to be lucid and comprehensible to them. To ensure that the questionnaire was reliable, the Cronbach's alpha of the items was calculated as a reliability estimate. Using the Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate, the alpha for this scale (sixteen 5-point Likert scale continuous items) is 0.67. This indicates acceptable reliability.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Students' participation in the survey and interviews was completely anonymous to protect their privacy and to make them feel at ease in expressing their opinions. The participants were informed about the research topic and the study's objectives and were given consent forms before the interviews, a process which is considered a cornerstone of the ethical matters concerning human subjects (Mackey and Gass, 2005). After the interviews, students reviewed their transcribed responses to check for accuracy. In addition, after the final data analyses, participants in the interviews were informed of the findings to ensure the reliability of the results.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

According to the sequential explanatory design, results of quantitative data are reported and then supported by the qualitative findingsbased on the three research questions. The first research question has quantitative answers that are supported by explanations and further interpretations from the interviews data where relevant qualitative responses are available. The second research question is interpreted quantitatively, whereas the third research question is answered using data obtained from the interviews.

4.1. General Perception Scale
4.1.1. Likert Scale Items

All 5-Point Likert scale items were coded as follows: Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, and Strongly Agree = 5.To interpret the Likert scale results, *M*and *SD* were calculated for the General Perception scale, which had *M*of 3.55 and *SD*of 0.63 as shown in Table 1. Slightly high levels of positive opinions occurred in items 2 and 4 (*M* = 3.66, *SD* = 1.48; *M* = 3.64, *SD* = 1.13), respectively.

Also, the frequency of responses for each item in the scale was calculated. The Result column, the last column in the General Perception scale, showed the highest obtained response percentages for each item. The responses for items 1–3, regarding students' general opinions of the conferencing method for feedback, showed that the percentages for highly selected responses were positive. The responses for items 4–7, regarding students' perceptions of the teacher's method of feedback and her comments during FBWCs, showed that the percentages for

highly selected responses ranged from Disagree to Neutral. The students' responses to the scale's second section, items 4–7, generally revealed their uncertainty because the highest percentages of selected responses were Neutral, except for item 6, regarding the uncomfortable setting of teacher-student meetings; the majority of students chose Disagree.

Table-1. Results of the general perception scale.

Item names	Item text	Means	SDs	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Result
Gen_1	I prefer to receive oral feedback through regular meetings with my teacher more than written feedback.	3.48	1.30	3.9%	14.3%	22.1%	33.8%	26%	33.8%
Gen_2	I find the teacher-feedback through conferencing (meetings) useful.	3.66	1.48	5.2%	6.5%	6.5%	50.6%	31.2%	50.6%
Gen_3	The feedback-based meetings with the teacher help me improve my academic writing skills.	3.55	1.47	2.6%	2.6%	7.8%	48.1%	39%	48.1%
Gen_4	The teacher's comments are the only reliable source of feedback.	3.64	1.13	5.2%	24.7%	33.8%	28.6%	7.8%	33.8%
Gen_5	The teacher's use of Arabic in the meeting can increase my understanding.	3.52	1.22	6.5%	16.9%	35.1%	29.9%	11.7%	35.1%
Gen_6	Feedback-based meetings with the teacher are uncomfortable to me.	3.47	1.29	13%	37.7%	18.2%	22.1%	9.1%	37.7%
Gen_7	The discussions during the meeting should be only on the rubric elements.	3.53	1.08	7.8%	32.5%	37.7%	19.5%	2.6%	37.7%

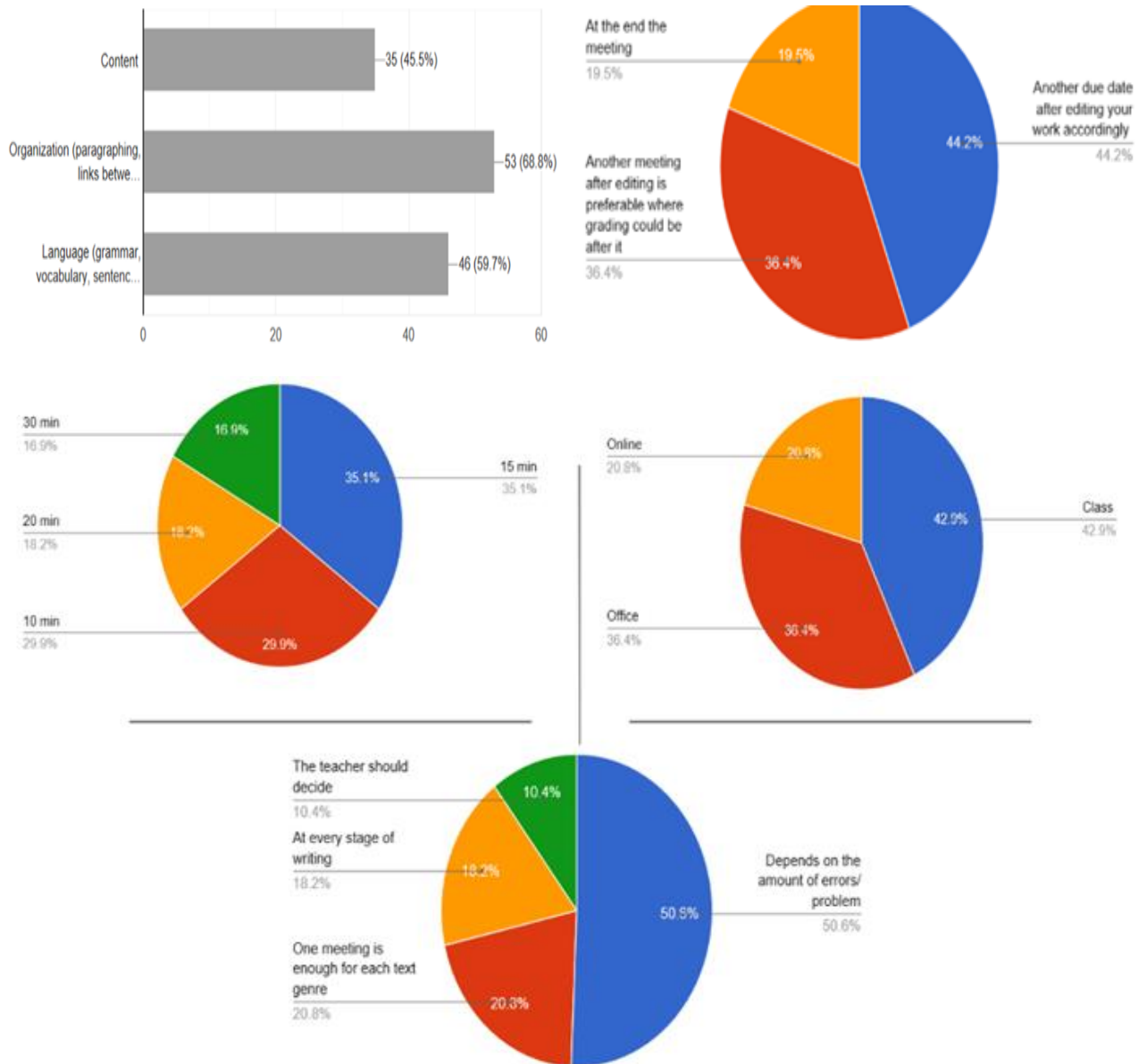### 4.1.2. Results of Check-Box Items
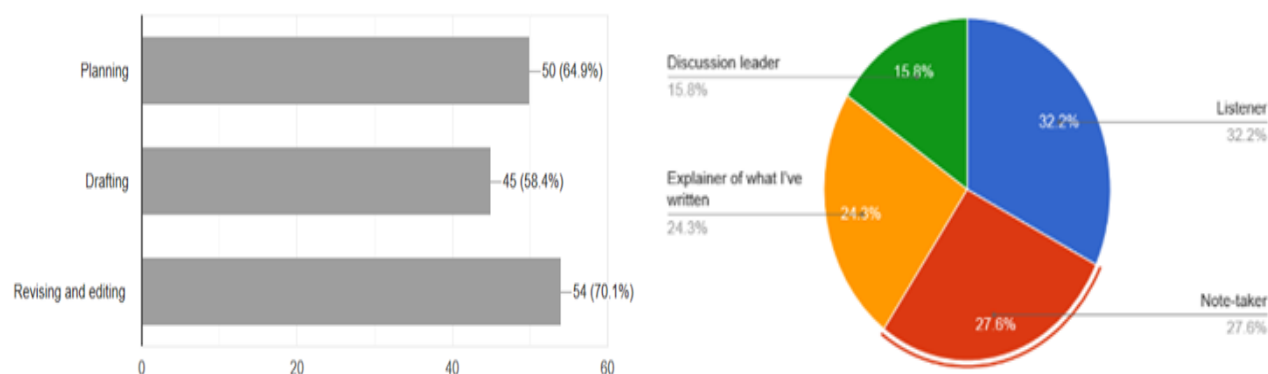
Figure-2. Results of check-box items (1).

4.1.3. Interpretation of the 'General Perception Scale' Using the Qualitative Data

The results of the first three items indicate participants' satisfaction and positive views on FBWCs. The qualitative results indicate varied opinions on the preferred source of feedback during the FBWC. Although the majority of participants are comfortable with FBWCs, a considerable percentage of participants find them to be stressful. Participants revealed some major causes of students' anxiety towards the FBWCs that could be nested under three major themes: their low English proficiency levels in speaking or writing, fear of live evaluation and teacher confrontation, and natural shyness. Therefore, participants suggested some tips that could be employed by teachers to help nervous students. One of the suggested solutions is pre-identifying students' proficiency levels to provide help for lower-level students and adapting the style of delivering feedback to suit their lower levels of English.

4.2. Individual and Group FBWCs Scales

4.2.1. Likert Scale Items

The Individual Feedback scale had *M* of 3.87 and *SD* of 0.94; the Group Feedback scale had *M* of 3.63 and *SD* of 0.86.The students' responses to item 3 in the Individual Feedback scale indicated that most of them understood their writing errors, which were explained during the individual FBWCs. The calculated *Ms* showed a high *M* value for item 1 in the Individual Feedback scale ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.41$), regarding the impact of individual FBWCs on improving students' critical thinking skills. Also, the calculated *M* of item 5 in the Group Feedback scale, regarding the impact of group FBWCs on improving students' critical thinking skills, showed a lower value ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.26$). Regarding the impact of FBWCs on students' autonomy, presented in items 2 and 6 in the Individual Feedback scale and in the Group Feedback scale, respectively, *M* of individual FBWCs revealed a lower value ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.31$) than *M* of group FBWCs ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.27$). Furthermore, most students revealed that their academic writing skills had improved in group FBWCs ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.37$), as shown in item 1 in the Group Feedback scale.

In view of the Result column of both scales, a high frequency of the Agree responses indicated positive opinions, whereas a high frequency of the Disagree responses indicated the students' dissatisfaction with discussing their writing mistakes in front of peers, while agreeing to share suggestions and receive constructive feedback from one another.

Table-2. Restults of the individual FBWCs scale.

Item names	Item text	Means	SDs	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Result
Ind_1	Individual feedback-based meetings improve my critical thinking skills.	3.87	1.41	5.2%	6.5%	11.7%	55.8%	20.8%	55.8%
Ind_2	Individual feedback-based meetings improve my autonomy.	3.69	1.31	2.6%	3.9%	27.3%	45.5%	20.8%	45.5%
Ind_3	I understand the feedback/the problem indicated (if any).	4.04	1.33	2.6%	3.9%	11.7%	62.3%	19.5%	62.3%

4.2.3. T-test Results

Beside descriptive statistics, inferential statistics were performed for the second research question on the students' preference for either individual or/and group FBWCs. A parametric paired *t test* was mainly conducted in the present study to measure the difference in participants' responses to the individual and group FBWCs items, thus, examining their preference and satisfaction concerning the two types of FBWCs.

On average, when comparing students' perceived helpfulness of academic writing feedback when offered individually (M = 3.87, SD = 0.94) and as a group (M = 3.63, SD = 0.86), students tended to find individualized feedback more helpful. Results from the *t test* indicated that there were no significant differences between students' perceived helpfulness of academic writing feedback offered individually versus in a group setting ($t_{76} = 1.784$, $p = 0.078$). Figure 4 represents the *Ms* of each variable in density plots.

Table-3. Restults of the group FBWCs scale.

Item names	Item text	Means	SDs	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Result
Gro_1	The feedback-based meetings with my peers help me better improve my academic writing skills.	3.79	1.37	5.2%	10.4%	15.6%	49.4%	19.5%	49.4%
Gro_2	I prefer to receive feedback and suggestions from my peers.	3.92	1.25	7.8%	18.2%	23.4%	46.8%	3.9%	46.8%
Gro_3	It's fine to discuss my text errors in front of my peers.	3.05	1.78	13%	28.6%	20.8%	27.3%	9.1%	28.6%
Gro_4	Group meetings with peers are more motivating than individual meetings.	3.52	1.27	10.4%	27.3%	26%	27.3%	9.1%	27.3%
Gro_5	Group meetings improve my critical thinking skills more than individual ones.	3.74	1.26	5.2%	13%	28.6%	41.6%	11.7%	41.6%
Gro_6	Group meetings improve my autonomy more than individual ones.	3.75	1.27	7.8%	9.1%	36.4%	42.9%	3.9%	42.9%

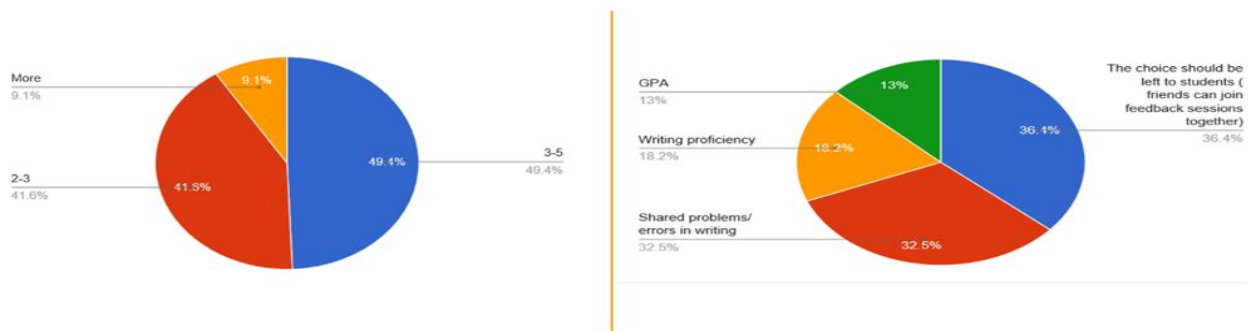### 4.2.2. Results of the Check-Box Items

Figure-3. Results of check-box items (2).
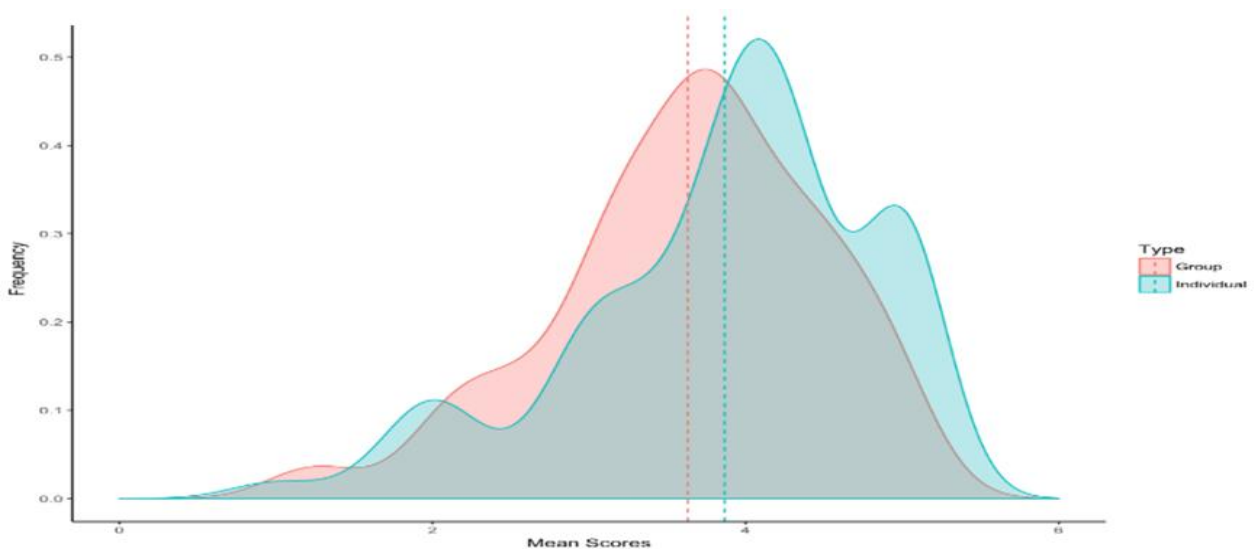
4.3. Third Research Question

Figure-4. Distribution and mean lines of individual and group variables.

Major themes from students' responses are sequenced and presented in this section in the order of each theme's frequency, from highest frequency to lowest. As shown in Figure 5, three major themes are generated from the interviews data that seem considerably correlated with one another.
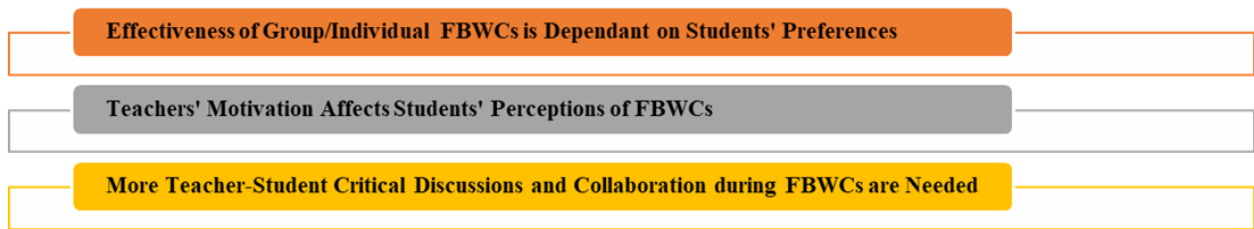
Effectiveness of Group/Individual FBWCs is Dependant on Students' Preferences

Teachers' Motivation Affects Students' Perceptions of FBWCs

More Teacher-Student Critical Discussions and Collaboration during FBWCs are Needed

Figure-5. Major Generated themes from the interviews.

4.3.1. Effectiveness of Group/Individual FBWCs is Dependant on Students' Preferences

The first theme generated from students' responses deals mainly with the possibility of the conferencing in one of two settings: individual and group FBWCs. Participants expressed contrasting views on the effectiveness of and preferences for individual and group FBWCs. Some participants mentioned that group FBWCs offer them a better chance to comprehend the teacher's feedback and improve their writing. Participants noted that the collaborative discussions between the teacher and a group of students during the FBWC could increase their comprehension of common writing errors. Participants stated that they would have an opportunity to explore many writing mistakes and understand the teacher's explanations when they attended FBWC in groups. Further, some participants find group FBWCs to be less stressful, as the teacher equally evaluates multiple texts during one session. However, the rest of the participants preferred to have individual meetings with their writing teacher, asserting that individual meetings offered them more focused and rich feedback than conferences conducted in groups. Finally, most participants emphasized the significance of asking students about their preferences beforehand regarding the location of FBWCs to offer students a desirable atmosphere for the feedback.

4.3.2. Teachers' Motivation Affects Students' Perceptions o FBWCs

According to the data, when students' preferences are thoroughly identified and effectively implemented in FBWCs, their motivation to improve their writing proficiency level increases and encourages them to attend the FBWCs. One participant noted that creativity and motivation could be fostered by opening with interesting discussions during the FBWCs in addition to keeping the major focus of the conference on writing feedback. In addition, participants felt that the teacher's attitude plays a significant role in students' motivation; as one participant articulated it, *'teachers need to treat students nicely' (participant H)*. Participants need more chances to make mistakes, and their writing attempts should not be penalised but instead be supported by the teacher.

4.3.3. More Teacher-Student Critical Discussions and Collaboration during FBWCs are Needed

Another subtheme that is nested under participants' suggestions for better FBWCs is the value of the opportunity for reflection and meaningful negotiations offered to them during the FBWCs. Teacher–student discussions during the FBWCs are viewed by participants as an essential aspect of effective FBWCs. Participants think that they need to participate in meaning construction and rigorous discussions to comprehend what they have done wrong or/and maintain their strong writing points. Most participants associated effective understanding of writing feedback with students playing active roles during the FBWC. For example, *'I need to participate in order to understand and that it is ineffective to be a listener only . . . I need to negotiate meaning with other participants . . . I wouldn't*

understand if I didn't talk' (participant C). On the other hand, some participants prefer the discussion to be led by the teacher, because the teacher's comments are what they mainly need and what would be most likely to benefit them.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the present study, major findings obtained from students' responses generally revealed their positive opinions towards FBWCs, which were based mainly on their previous experiences and expectations of what constituted an effective FBWC. Although several feedback methods for writing have been discussed in the literature review, a comparison between oral and written feedback will be drawn here based on the obtained results. One aim of the first research question was to ascertain students' perceptions of two types of feedback, oral and written, which were the feedback methods most frequently referred to and also constantly compared by interviewees. This study's results revealed that oral writing feedback offered through conferencing was a highly preferable choice for students who sought effective and comprehensive feedback.

Students also believed they were likely to advance in their writing levels when given an opportunity to have constructive conversations with their teacher—conversations that featured simplified explanations of different parts of their texts. The preference for oral feedback could be attributed to the opportunity given to students in which they freely discussed their errors through interactional dialogues with their writing teacher (Marzban and Sarjami, 2014). In their research, Marzban and Sarjami (2014) found that collaborative dialogic conversations during writing conferences could enhance comprehension and communication to make the feedback process more beneficial and desirable for students. Hyland and Hyland (2006) also found feedback processes to be influential when students attending a conference were actively involved participants who significantly contributed to their learning processes as well as to the processes of other participants (Sobhani and Tayebipour, 2015). Additional research has shown that students' writing knowledg facilitated their involvement within *intermental development zones* to independently engage in reflection, analysis, and synthesis activities (Nicholas and Paatsch, 2014).

In the present study, the results of students' preferences for individual versus group FBWCs indicated no significant difference between the two modes of conferencing. However, the current findings showed that individual FBWCs were slightly more preferable and desirable to college students, as Yeh (2016) survey conveyed. Also, the correlation calculated for the age variable and individual FBWCs revealed that students in their early twenties preferred meeting with the teacher individually for writing feedback; in contrast, a slight negative correlation was observed between age and group FBWCs. These results indicated that individualized feedback methods offered students more privacy and richer feedback about their texts, and prevented interference from the simultaneous viewing of other students' texts. Thus, students who preferred individual FBWCs believed that their role as primarily listeners during individual FBWCs maximised their understanding and enabled them to thoroughly absorb the teacher's feedback.

Similar to Yeh (2016) survey results, students in the present study who supported individual FBWCs typically relied on the teacher's feedback and comments because they viewed them as reliable and beneficial sources that led directly to writing development. When the teacher's feedback was not adequate, however, students who were more involved in individual FBWCs than in peer evaluations tended to be analytical and critical self-mediators. Students with these characteristics appeared more secure when the teacher served as the primary mediator who offered writing feedback, motivation, and guidance. In other research, Eckstein (2013) proposed that the teacher's assistance during FBWCs could have provided an increased awareness of the essential, linguistic elements for EFL students who lacked the academic knowledge needed for professional writing.

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As a result, students were more likely to be influenced by the teacher's attitudes during the FBWC because of their reliance on the teacher's scaffolding and her role as mediator. Students who collaboratively discussed and evaluated their writing with their teacher and peers learned various ways to develop their writing skills. Possibly, these collaborative features of FBWCs may be missing in individualised feedback methods that include the teacher and one student (Nosratinia and Nikpanjeh, 2015). In contrast, some previous studies have summarized the disadvantages of conferences that featured insufficient feedback in situations where teachers authoritatively evaluated texts and students had few opportunities for interaction; however, some students seemed to prefer those types of conferences (Abdulkhaleq *et al.,* 2013). It can be noted here that an authoritative teaching approach could influence students' perception and assumption of passive roles (Ewert, 2009).

5.1. Implications for L2 Teaching and Recommendations

Several instructional implications have been identified based on major results, SCT, and relevant research. The SCT has advocated for teachers to play facilitating and guiding roles during scaffolding while students attempt to construct meaning in individual or group settings. Thus, to provide the most effective feedback, writing teachers who draw from the SCT would build interactive, accommodating environments to facilitate feedback that meets students' individual learning styles and levels of proficiency. In other words, the FBWC involves a social activity wherein human minds develop through interaction during individual conferences with the teacher or through group conferences, both of which involve sharing writing and exchanging feedback (Mochizuki, 2018).

In attending to students' anxiety levels during FBWCs, researchers have proposed several ways to reduce that anxiety. Increasing students' awareness of the purpose of FBWCs and implementing ice-breaking conversations at the beginning of a session has appeared to ease anxiety in university-level students (Goldstein and Conrad, 1990). In addition, some researchers have proposed that writing teachers should encourage students to document all writing errors and issues covered in a conference by note-taking or audio recording and then summarized at the end of the conference by the teacher to improve writing skills (Abdulkhaleq *et al.,* 2013).

5.2. Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

It is noteworthy to acknowledge some limitations of the present study that mainly were time constraints and small sample size. Additionally, to investigate the effectiveness and impact of current feedback strategies on student writing levels, future studies could examine the academic writing achievements of EFL students who were exposed to FBWCs during their first year in other academic institutions.Future studies could also combine further data collection methods. For example, a qualitative phenomenological study could be done in which students are asked about their learning experiences using interviews in addition to classroom observations could be employed to determine writing problems. Numerical data could be used to supplement a qualitative method; writing performance could be measured with a prewriting test before the FBWC and a post-test at the end of the conference. In summary, the EFL literature lacks research about advanced EFL learners and their challenges with essential language skills, such as academic writing. Further research to improve writing feedback strategies and to maintain solid English proficiency can benefit many EFL students, especially those who seek mastery level learning.

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