

ZPD and the Benefits of Written Feedback in L2 Writing: Focusing on Students' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The significance of feedback in the learning process, including that in second language (L2) writing pedagogy has been widely recognized. Many studies investigating the effect of feedback on students' writing have indicated that the feedback process helps students improve their writing quality. However, few studies exist that focus on how the benefits of feedback, particularly written feedback is perceived by the students. Grounded in sociocultural theory (SCT), this study aimed to investigate students' perceptions of the benefits of written feedback and to show how Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is relevant to the process of feedback in L2 writing. The results indicate that written feedback helps students improve writing quality and skills, encourage critical reasoning, and promote learner autonomy. Furthermore, social interactions during feedback activities also helped students extend their ZPDs. This study is of significance to language educators and researchers engaged in L2 teaching and learning. It may also contribute to the Vygotskian theoretical framework of SCT for illustrating a more expanded understanding of the concept of ZPD, particularly in relation to adult EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Feedback has been acknowledged as an important part of the learning process. It is depicted as a significant factor to improve knowledge and skill acquisition in writing (Shute, 2008). In addition to its impact on achievement, feedback is also seen as crucial for both consolidating and encouraging learning (Kahyalar & Yılmaz, 2016). A major justification for including feedback as part of learning practice is the Vygotskian theoretical framework of sociocultural theory (SCT). SCT emphasizes social interactions in learning where meaning is derived through the use of mediating tools (Behroozizad, Nambiar, & Amir, 2014)

According to Vygotsky (1978), human development is inherently a socially situated activity, thus the source of learning and development is found in social interaction rather than solely in the mind of an individual. Vygotsky furthermore claims that the secret of effective learning lies in the nature of the social interaction between two or more people with different levels of skills and knowledge.

The importance of feedback in educational contexts has been confirmed through various studies (Ferris, 2003, 2006; Hounsell, 2003; Ramsden, 2003). Hounsell (2003) asserts that feedback plays a decisive role in learning and development, within and beyond formal educational settings. Thus, providing effective feedback on students' work represents one of the key characteristics of quality teaching (Ramsden, 2003). Noting the prominence of feedback in the learning process, the literature suggests that existing practices in educational context embrace feedback as an inherent element in the teaching learning process.

The significance of feedback has also been widely recognized in the development of second language (L2) writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). A large body of research has been conducted to investigate different aspects of feedback in L2 writing classrooms, including its benefits. Many studies found that the written feedback process helps students improve the quality of their writings (e.g., Farrah, 2012; Kahyalar & Yilmaz, 2016; Kamberi, 2013). However, most of them reported the benefits of feedback in improving students' writing from the instructors/researchers' point of view, while those focusing on the significance of written feedback as it is perceived by students are still very limited. This study was conducted to address the question: "What benefits of written feedback do students perceive in L2 writing?" The result of this study is hoped to fill the gap in the existing literature and to contribute to the growing body of research focusing on students' perceptions of the feedback process in L2 writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ZPD and Learning Process

Vygotsky's concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been used extensively as the theoretical basis for various studies investigating the role of feedback in L2 classrooms (e.g., Altstaedter & Doolittle, 2014; Fithriani, 2017; Wakabayashi, 2013; Yu & Lee, 2014). Vygotsky (1978) comprehensively explains his concept of ZPD; however, it is mostly cited as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Through this definition, he emphasizes the role of social interactions as a key aspect to learning in ZPD. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978, p. 87) also refers to ZPD as "(the psychical) functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation." The development of these psychical functions from elementary/lower mental to higher psychical forms lies in four major criteria: the emergence of voluntary regulation and conscious realization of mental processes, the social origins and social nature of higher mental functions, and the use of signs to mediate higher functions (Wertsch, 1985; Mahn, 2015).

From the two definitions above, it can be concluded that a learner develops her mental functions within the ZPD as she co-constructs knowledge with a more able peer or an adult, usually a teacher through guided learning. During this collaboration, the learner can participate in and extend her current skills and knowledge to a high level of competence through the imitation of the thinking process of the teacher and the peer; directional assistance which is determined by the learner's need; and extraction of assistance when it is no longer needed. Such assistance is now commonly referred to in the literature as scaffolding. The learner can be said to reach the phase of internalization when she becomes consciously aware of the thinking processes inherent in the provided assistance. This conscious realization of the mental process allows her to accomplish a task on her own and thus is regulating her own writing, which signals that the learner has extended her ZPD (Mahn, 2012).

Feedback Benefits in L2 Writing

A significant number of studies have been conducted to investigate the benefits of feedback in L2 writing, with most of them focusing on the effect of feedback on students' writing quality. The findings have indicated that the written feedback process helps students improve the quality

of their writings (Berg, 1999; Farrah, 2012; Kahyalar & Yılmaz, 2016; Jahin, 2012; Kamberi, 2013; Miao, Badger, & Zhen, 2006; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998). Using a quantitative approach, the researchers show how students' writing grades improve significantly from those before the feedback process was implemented. In addition to writing quality, Berg (1999) also found that participating in peer feedback activities helped students develop critical thinking, while Miao, Badger, and Zhen (2006) and Villamil and De Guerrero (1998) reported that peer feedback promoted learner autonomy.

However, despite the significant impact of written feedback, the literature reveals that students are often dissatisfied with the feedback they receive for various reasons such as lacking specific advice to improve, being difficult to interpret, and having a potentially negative impact on students' self-perception and confidence (Carless, 2006). Furthermore, some students also reported that they were dissatisfied with peer feedback as they did not benefit from the process (Eksi, 2012). For those reasons, this study was conducted to contribute to the existing body of literature focusing on students' perception of the benefits of teacher and peer written feedback in L2 writing.

METHOD

This study was conducted in a state university in Medan, Indonesia. A qualitative case study approach was used for this study involving both quantitative data, indicating the number of feedback provided by the teacher and the peers and the frequency of feedback incorporation in the revision, and qualitative data in the form of a written feedback questionnaire, reflective essays, and interview transcripts.

Participants

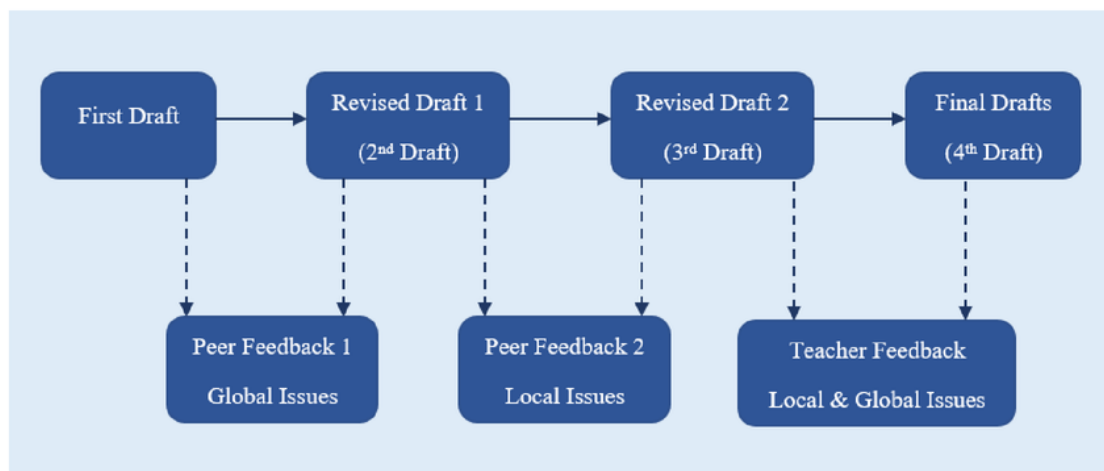
Eleven students (7 female and 4 male) majoring in English education took part in this study voluntarily after the researcher explained to them the purpose of the research. Purposeful sampling was used in recruiting them to participate in this study. Creswell and Clark (2011) define purposeful sampling as a technique employed to identify and select a prospective participant or a group of prospective participants who have the knowledge and experience with the phenomenon under study. To be eligible to participate in this study, the students needed to be in the sixth semester. This criterion was used to ensure that the students had similar fundamental understandings of English writing as they had taken and passed two writing courses (*Writing Skill I* and *Writing skill II*) offered in previous semesters. The participants are homogenous in terms of first language but diverse in mother tongue, gender, ethnicity, and perceived L2 writing skill. Mother tongue here refers to the languages that they use at home with their families, which include Indonesian, Javanese, Mandailing, Gayo, and Pakpak, while the first language is the dominant language they are fluent in, in this case is Indonesian.

Writing Procedure

This study was conducted in an after-class writing course consisting of seven meetings, with each meeting lasting for two hours. During the writing course, students completed two writing tasks of argumentative essay: *agree & disagree* and *comparison & contrast*. Furthermore, as part

of the writing tasks, students completed a sequential series of tasks including: (1) writing the first draft of an essay; (2) providing written feedback on peers' essays with the focus on global issues such as ideas, content, and organization of the writing; (3) writing the second drafts after peer feedback session 1; (4) providing written feedback on peers' essays with the focus on local issues which include grammar accuracy, spelling, punctuation, and formatting; writing the third draft after peer feedback session 2 and the final draft after teacher feedback. Figure 1 illustrates the writing and feedback procedure in this study.

Figure 1. Essay Writing and Feedback Stages



Instrument

The data for this study were collected using a variety of instruments including students' writings with teacher's and peers' comments on them, reflective essays, questionnaire, and interview, to ensure that nuances of students' perceptions in every stage of the written feedback process were captured. The reflective essay was written after every written feedback session with 15 to 20 minutes of time allocated. Each student wrote a total of six reflective essays during this study. The questionnaire, adapted from Diab's (2005) and Johnstun's (2009) studies, was administered twice during the study, each after the submission of the final draft. The adaptation involved rephrasing or adjustment to better serve the purpose of this research. The interview was conducted after the end of the writing course and initial data analysis. The purpose of this interview was to obtain deeper information about the students' general perceptions of the written feedback process and to ask additional questions that emerged from my ongoing data analysis. Finally, the data from writing drafts were used to find out how much feedback the students received and incorporated in their revision.

Data Analysis

Inductive content analysis, which is focused on answering a research question by identifying themes in selected material (Terrell, 2016) was used as the main data analysis in this study. Students' responses in reflective journal and questionnaire were contextually analyzed through three coding stages. In the first stage of coding, significant quotes and passages were manually coded using color pencils. The initial findings were then recorded in researcher's note as guidance in preparing the interview questions. In the second stage, all significant quotes and passages from the initial findings and from the interview transcripts were further analyzed at the sentence level for coding and temporary categorizing. The findings from this stage of coding were later analyzed again in the final coding stage. This process was iterative before reasonable saturation for categories and sub-categories could be reached.

The data from students' writing drafts were manually analyzed through cross-reference and comparison. The revised version of a draft was compared with the previous version and the feedback provided on it. The data from each draft were recorded under six categories as follows:

1. peer feedback on local issues received and used
2. peer feedback on global issues received and used
3. teacher feedback received and used
4. self-revision on global and local issues after the first peer feedback
5. self-revision on global and local issues after the second peer-feedback; and
6. self-revision on global and local feedback after teacher.

To establish trustworthiness, this study employed a peer debriefing strategy by involving another writing instructor in the same department where this study was conducted to be a critical friend who reviewed and gave feedback related to the data analysis. The peer debriefer was chosen for her expertise in qualitative research and her experience in EFL writing instruction. The coding results from the researcher and the peer debriefer along with the Inter-Rater Reliability (IRR) are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Coding Strength & IRR

Category	Same	Missed	IRR
Generate improvement	98	22	82%
Encourage critical reasonings	65	15	81%
Promote learning autonomy	51	9	85%

FINDINGS

The analysis of the data from three sources -- questionnaire, reflective journal, and interview -- revealed that there are three benefits that the students perceived after taking parts in the written feedback activities as feedback receivers and providers, namely: improving writing quality and language skills, encouraging critical reasonings, and promoting learning autonomy. The details will be discussed in the following sub-sections.

Theme One: Generate Improvement

The most mentioned benefit of written feedback from the three data sources is how the whole processes of written feedback in this study helped students generate improvement either in

their essay quality or their language skills. This benefit was reported from both the feedback providers' and the feedback receivers' perspectives. As feedback providers, the students stated that giving feedback on peers' drafts gave them a good opportunity to read and learn from others' writings about different writing styles and ways of presenting ideas and arguments (as seen in excerpt 1). Furthermore, they mentioned that comparing each other's essays provided them with text varieties and idea variations. They also mentioned that reading others' writings was also beneficial in helping them become critical readers.

First of all, I learned about different writing styles. I really like it, especially with the second essay because we needed to work in a group. So I have two (drafts) that I needed to comment. (The two) were totally different although we were provided with the same prompt, but we wrote differently. So I learned this is another way to write it. Especially I learned about how to start an argument and gave strong example to support it... they also had different organization and used different transition signals. It really improved my knowledge. (Excerpt 1, interview)

The perceived benefits of written feedback were reported even more strongly from the writer's perspective. The major appreciation of peer feedback was that it was helpful to improve the final product of the students' essay. The improvement could be in the quality of overall writing or some aspects of writing such as improvements in "idea development/expression," "introduction and/or conclusion," "paragraph organization," "enriched vocabulary," and "stronger argument to support ideas." Students also stated that receiving written feedback increased their awareness of writing for an audience, as seen in excerpt 2.

Most of all, I learned a lot from all the feedbacks. I think my writing skill and my knowledge were also improved. Before this, I only paid attention to local issues in my writing, especially grammar. I did not have much understanding about the global issues. Now I know that global issues like organization and idea expression is even more important to make my writing understood by the readers. (Excerpt 2, reflective essay)

Theme Two: Encourage Critical Reasonings

Besides generating improvement, students also reported that participating in written feedback activities as feedback receivers and providers encouraged their critical reasonings. Hudgins and Edelman (1986) define critical reasoning as "the disposition to provide evidence in support of one's conclusions and to request evidence from others before accepting their conclusions" (p. 333). In accord with this definition, Facione and Facione (2007) assert critical reasoning as "reflective decision-making and thoughtful problem solving about what to believe and do" (p. 44). Using those definitions as a reference, critical reasonings here refer to any effort the students made to confirm written feedback received before deciding to use it or not.

In this study, students became more critical when looking at the quality of feedback provided by teacher and peers. They were not quick to accept the suggestions, especially those from peers. They tended to examine them from various aspects such as their applicability, correctness, and impact in their overall writing before deciding to use or ignore them in revisions (as seen in excerpt 3). They implemented their critical reasoning through three methods; consulting other resources, finding a second opinion, and examining feedback applicability.

When I got peer feedback, the first thing I did was checking its applicability in my writing. Why should I use it in my writing if [it] didn't make my writing better? Sometimes when I'm not sure whether it's correct or wrong, I asked other friends their opinions, at least two friends. If they said it's correct, I used it. If they gave different opinions, I found a third person. (Excerpt 3, interview)

When consulting other resources, the students mentioned the use of "books," "online resources such as journal articles or websites," "dictionary," and "class notes." In their efforts to find a second opinion, students reported to go to "other friends/fellow classmates," "the class instructor," and "other teachers who did not teach the class." However, when they were looking for a second opinion, they would go to some more authoritative figures whom they thought at least have equal knowledge with the feedback provider. Thus, when they questioned the legitimacy of teacher feedback, they would go to another teacher not their peers (as seen in excerpt 4). Meanwhile, when they examined the feedback applicability in their writings, students considered some aspects such as "feasibility," "logicality," "flow with the essay," and how it changed or enhanced the meaning expressed."

Student: When I'm not sure if the feedback was correct or not, I usually consulted my books or dictionaries first. Sometimes I also asked my friends' opinions. If they said it's good, I took it, otherwise it's better to ignore it.

Interviewer: Did you also look for a second opinion on teacher feedback?

Student: I did, but not from my friends. I went to other teachers.

Interviewer: Why didn't you ask your friends?

Student: I don't think they have more knowledge than the teacher. (Excerpt 4, interview)

Theme Three: Promote Learner Autonomy

The final theme that emerged from the data analysis related to the benefits of feedback is that it helped promote learner autonomy. Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p. 3). He furthermore explained that taking charge of one's own learning means to have, and hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning. One key principle of learner autonomy is the emphasis on the role of the learner rather than the role of the teacher or other people. In other words, students should be active participants in their own learning. When implementing written feedback activities in a writing class, a student writer should not be a passive participant who is too dependent on feedback provided for their revisions but should also take an active role in criticizing their own work.

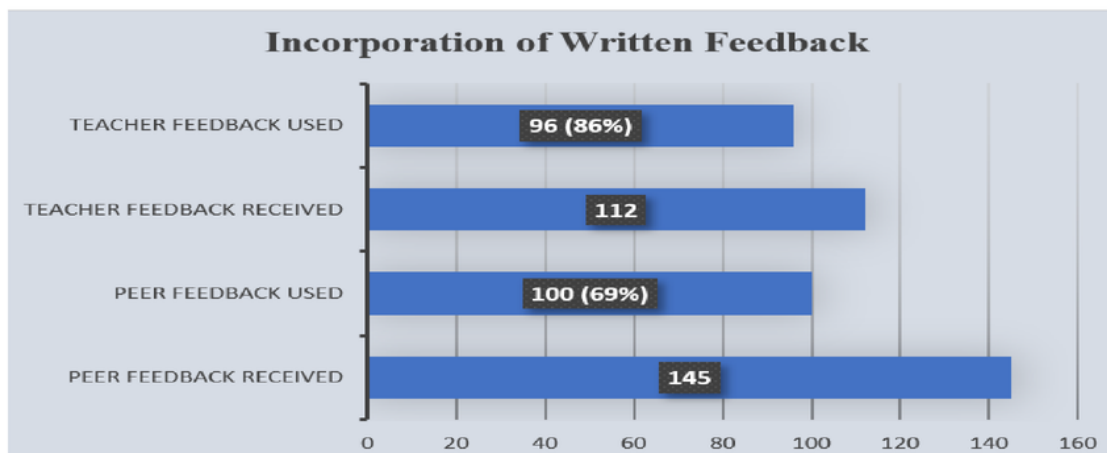
In this study, giving and receiving written feedback appears to have contributed to learner autonomy in that the student writers gained the ability to self-identify and self-revise their own writing. Self-identification here refers to the writers' ability to recognize their own mistakes. Furthermore, they were also able to evaluate their own strength and weaknesses in relation to writing skills. And ultimately, students were able to self-revise the mistakes. Self-revision refers to any revision that was made by the writers themselves, not initiated by their teacher or peers.

The students explained two reasons of self-revision during the writing process: finding mistakes when revising their drafts and dissatisfaction with their writing quality after comparing it with peers as seen in excerpt 5.

When I wrote my first draft, I poured out whatever I had in my mind. After a few days, I visited it again and read it very carefully. That's when I usually found out that I made many mistakes in grammar or global issues... I also learned from my friend's comment. For example, she showed me one mistake about tenses in my draft and suggested correction, but when I revised [my draft] I found more mistakes similar like that and corrected them myself. (Excerpt 5, interview)

The frequency count analysis of the data from students' writing drafts showed the number of self-revision students made in total was higher than the total number of corrections and suggestions they received from peer and teacher feedback (look at figure 2 for detail). A closer look at the data revealed that students generated more self-revision after peer feedback. This means students were encouraged to activate their critical reasoning more often after they received peer feedback.

Figure 2. Distribution of Written Feedback



DISCUSSION

Despite the differences in terms of research approach, focus of investigation, and types of feedback involved, the findings of this study correlate to those in previous ones. First, feedback helps improve writing quality was also reported in other studies applying quantitative approach (e.g., Farrah, 2012; Kahyalar & Yilmaz, 2016; Jahin, 2012; Kamberi, 2013). Second, the benefit of feedback in encouraging critical thinking echoes Berg's (1999) study that found the effectiveness of peer feedback as a means of aiding writing development and the benefit of feedback to encourage critical reasoning. Finally, Miao, Badger, and Zhen (2006) and Villamil and De Guerrero (1998) also reported that peer feedback had a beneficial effect on the quality of writing and led to more learner autonomy.

From the sociocultural perspective, since ZPD refers to that metaphorical space between what learners are able to do on their own and what they are able to do through the help of a more knowledgeable or experienced other, this finding indicated social interactions through written feedback activities helped students develop higher psychological functions within the ZPD as they co-constructed knowledge with their peers and teacher, with the collaboration with peers seeming to have more impact on higher psychological development than that with the teacher. Through

written feedback activities, students first intellectually imitated their peers' and teacher's mental processes by understanding the feedback they provided and incorporating it in their writings. This intellectual imitation helped students develop their conscious awareness of their own mental processes, which resulted in the ability to self-regulate their own writing by self-identifying the errors and self-revising them without any assistance from other people. These three stages of intellectual imitation, conscious awareness, and self-regulation are the essence of higher psychical processes within the ZPD.

CONCLUSION

The success of a teaching instruction approach that incorporates written feedback as an essential step in the learning process is related to students' perceptions of this type of strategy. If students do not see written feedback as a valuable and helpful process that can enhance their learning, it is likely that they will not fully commit to the process. Given this understanding, it is important for teachers to take into consideration students' perceptions of the benefits of feedback process in L2 writing instruction as they play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of its implementation.

While acknowledging the limitations of the informal classroom setting, this study may contribute to the body of research on students' perceptions of written feedback in L2 writing, particularly in Indonesian EFL context. This study might also lead to similar research studies that may collectively provide a more extensive framework for understanding ESL/EFL students' perceptions of feedback in L2 writing. The replication of this study in a formal classroom setting with a larger size of participants could be conducted to increase the generalizability of the results. Future directions of research including a comparison between the benefits of written feedback as students perceive with its effect on students' writing would also be interesting to conduct to find out whether the perceptions equal to the reality.

In relation to the Vygotskian theoretical framework of sociocultural theory, since Vygotsky proposed SCT based on his research focusing on the processes of children's development of psychical functions from birth to adolescence, this study may contribute to the theory as it illustrates a more expanded understanding of the concept of ZPD, particularly in relation to adult EFL learners. This study also shows how the essence of Vygotskian concept of higher psychical processes within the ZPD through the three stages of intellectual imitation, conscious awareness, and self-regulation was applied to adult EFL learners' thinking process during the written feedback activities.

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