

Egyptian EFL Writers' and Instructors' Perceptions of Peer Written Feedback

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Abstract

The principal aim of this study is to compare between the perceptions of peer feedback (PF) and teacher feedback (TF) as viewed by adult Egyptian L2 writers. That aim is pursued to address the lack of abundance of that line of research in Egypt, and particularly targeting adult L2 writers. Consequently, the study is guided by four research questions enquiring about general perceptions of PF versus TF, how PF and TF prioritize feedback on writing features differently, the perceptions of PF and TF uptake, and differences between genders in their perception of PF and TF. This study adopted mixed methods approach consisting of a questionnaire, multiple interviews, and writing samples. The total number of participants is 88, and 16 writing samples. The data analysis presents a considerable awareness of the importance of PF in comparison to TF. L2 writers understand the value, use and benefit from PF, but not at the same extent of using TF. Two thirds of the adult L2 writers participating in this study support the importance of training the peer on giving effective writing feedback. Furthermore, the data shows that the peer prioritizes almost the same writing features that the teacher does in their feedback. As for the perceptions of PF and TF uptake, L2 writers in Egypt believe, react, and feel motivated towards PF and TF in roughly the same way. Finally, the investigation of gender differences and the effect of that on the perceptions of PF and TF yield no significant differences quantitatively.

Keywords: Feedback Perceptions, Peer Feedback, Perceptions of Feedback Uptake, Teacher Feedback, Writing Features, Written Feedback

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Introduction

Providing effective feedback contributes significantly to learning a foreign/second language (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In a classroom setting, feedback is a tool through which the teacher guides the learners to those areas they need to improve, and as well gauges their degree of learning. Feedback also motivates learners to further improve in their learning journey (Ghani & Asgher, 2012). Noroozi et al., (2016) argued that the provision and receipt of feedback in the form of the debate and negotiation that take place between peers, for instance, lead to learning the content, and thus, constructing deeper knowledge. Feedback on students' writing—specifically—should endorse the improvement of the writing skill in L2 learning as argued by a number of researchers in the field of English language teaching (ELT), such as Min (2006), Paulus (1999), and Zhang (2008).

Comparing writing feedback, which is provided to L2 writers in a written form that is direct on all writing features, from the peer (PF) with that from the teacher (TF) has given rise to controversy for decades. The general perception that L2 writers have about feedback is that it is optimum when it is received from the teacher (Ghani & Asgher, 2012); however, some research has also looked at PF as a new practice since the 1980s (e.g., Chaudron 1977; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Partridge, 1983). Moreover, those studies that compared students' perception of PF versus TF have gained traction and showed some interesting findings as will be discussed below.

As posited by Lindsay and Norman (1991), perceptions, in their broad meaning, are characterised by being experiences where humans deal with the data provided by their sensory systems and organize them selectively. Many studies have investigated L2 writers' perceptions of feedback. Of those studies, which concluded that the teacher's writing feedback (WF) is more favored over that of the peer, is Chen and Lin's (2009) experiment proving that preference, but the students in their sample maintained the acknowledgement of the peer's effort in correcting their mistakes. On the other hand, rejection of PF was a significant common finding in research studies done by Falchikov (1986), and Orsmond et al. (2000). In both studies, there were wide gaps in grading the same writing samples by the tutor and the peer. That disparity in grading led participants to perceive PF negatively and prefer TF. For Orsmond et al., it was apparent that learners had different perceptions and interpretation of individual marking criteria both among themselves, and between them and the tutor despite being given verbal and written training. This dichotomy of grading between the tutor and the peer caused the lack of trust of PF and rejection of it to ensue.

1. Earlier Studies

The research on whether PF does have advantages reports striking findings. Tsui and Ng (2000) argued that positive PF fosters more motivation for learners owing to the fact that, in their study, their participants acknowledged the low apprehension that they experienced when they discussed their writing with the peer than with the teacher. Moreover, Ghani and Asgher (2012) listed a number of advantages of the PF practice. They claimed that it makes students perform the role of a reader and a writer simultaneously, which sharpens their analytical and critical thinking skills. It also paves the way for communication to occur authentically; students explain, justify and arrange their writing, or the writing they critique, in a real communicative way. What is additionally totally unique in PF according to them is that it is immediate; clarifications sought are responded to instantly from the peer sitting in the next seat.

The analogy drawn between PF and TF has induced more research in that area. Of those researchers, some have affirmed that PF is more advantageous to learners than TF. Rollinson (2005), for instance, claimed that PF surpasses TF in a number of features. Firstly, the casual interaction that happens between peers leads to effective negotiation of meaning, posing questions, requesting clarification, and most importantly, rejecting the peer's comment altogether. In contrast, interaction with the teacher while receiving feedback is one-way; hence, the student may revise their piece of writing based on the feedback of the teacher without fully understanding the justification underlying it. A second advantage that Rollinson saw as paramount is the fact that the peer can get engaged in prolonged discussions and meaning negotiation; a conversation can extend even beyond the boundaries of a classroom, and peers can exchange resources to prove the correctness and validity of one lexical/grammatical point they are making, and this aids the positive perception of that practice. Teachers, on the other hand, do not always exercise this privilege when teaching classes that operate at full capacity. Caulk (1994) held the same view about the upside of PF, not only in large classes, but in the majority of learning settings. Caulk argued that classmates provide each other with comments on writing instantly and meticulously, and in different aspects of writing.

The results of the aforementioned studies show that there is a widening chasm. On the one hand, some research studies indicate the negative perceptions of the effectiveness of PF (Chen & Lin, 2009; Falchikov, 1986; Orsmond et al., 2000; Truscott, 1996 to mention but a few), and on the other hand, some other studies denote positive perceptions (Caulk, 1994; Ghani & Asgher, 2012; Rollinson, 2005; Tsui & Ng, 2000 to name but a few). This chasm is attributed to the discrepancy in the research methodology, the recruitment method of participants' sample and its size, and the study aim. This disparity instigates the need for further research in different countries and in diverse settings in order to establish a pattern for the effectiveness of one source of feedback over the other, or the balanced students' perception of both in facilitating the revision of students' writing.

Another perspective that has sparked the interest of researchers is the writing features that are prioritized in PF and TF. In one early study to locate any similarities between PF and TF in terms of what writing features are focused on and are advised to be revised, Nelson and Murphy (1993) reported some interesting findings that indicated that in 50% of the cases, the peer and the teacher provided feedback on the same areas.

Looking into *uptake*, it is defined by Loewen (2004) as the student's attempt to include the feedback received into their future writing draft. Loewen categorised uptake—considering the time of the students' incorporating or producing the linguistic form—into *successful* and *unsuccessful uptake*, based on the result of the subsequent drafts. Comparing the uptake that takes place after PF and TF is key to deeper understanding of uptake. Zhang (1995) carried out a study on ESL students in two American universities in which 94% of students showed more signs of uptake following TF than PF. Jacobs et al. (1998) investigation about learners' attitude towards PF and TF reported opposite results where 93% of their students voiced their liking of PF and showed higher uptake from it.

Expectations from feedback are a major factor in the uptake of feedback. Atmaca (2016) argued that perspectives of feedback that are different between the teacher and their students can result in misinterpretation of how valuable the feedback is; hence, teachers need to raise their learners' awareness of the purpose of feedback; how to react to and use it to improve

their writing skills. That early awareness, according to Atmaca, helps reshape their attitude and belief about the value of feedback.

Gender difference in peer feedback is another area of research that the current study aimed to explore. As claimed by Noroozi et al. (2020), it is an area that is under represented, and thus requires more research. In their study, Noroozi et al. explored how the gender difference variable impacts: The quality of PF provided; the difference in responses to that PF; and the extent to which they benefit from it. Using an argumentative essay task as their data collection tool, Noroozi et al. found that females provided higher quality feedback—more elaborate—than their male counterparts. Moreover, no difference was recorded between both genders in terms of benefiting from PF.

2. Research Gap

By sifting through the literature of PF effectiveness and acceptance or rejection by learners, one will find a commonality between many research papers. Many of those researchers, looking into the viability of PF, urge other researchers in different countries and in different instructional settings to conduct more research into that area. They presume that the findings of research may change with learners of other nationalities, age groups and settings of educational instruction. That assumption is supported by Chen et al. (2016) who observed that the EFL practices in developing countries are not included significantly in the international literature of that area, and that the EFL classes require their own unique research studies.

In Egypt, more studies are needed to compare between PF and TF as perceived by the age group of adult learners—who do general English language courses to boost their proficiency level for some personal, academic or professional reasons. This research problem has prompted some Egyptian researchers to scrutinize the influence of PF on students in higher education institutes. Their main research objective has been to gauge the effect of feedback from the peer and what features of language PF generally focuses on. For example, Shaalan (2017) recommends that more studies be carried out in the Egyptian context, especially to investigate whether (a) the proficiency level of the peer, and (b) the quality of the feedback have an effect on the learner's decision to use the peer's feedback. Therefore, this study worked towards deeper exploration of the perception of feedback of adult L2 writers.

3. Research Questions

This study aimed at exploiting a certain sector of L2 learners in Egypt. The study primarily focused on those adult learners taking general English language courses in different proficiency levels, and who study general English for diverse goals. The sample of participants, who were selected by convenience sampling, are adults L2 learners doing general English courses at the School of Continuing Education (SCE), at the American University in Cairo (AUC). Scrutinizing their perception of PF and TF in this research study has had far-reaching implications for adult classroom practices. Two specific areas are of interest in this context, namely the field of research and classroom practices. Firstly, as mentioned in an earlier section, more studies of L2 classes, and the perceptions about PF and TF of especially adult professionals learning English language in Egypt is an area requiring further research. Secondly, the results of this study can enlighten educators about how that age group of learners perceives PF in comparison to TF; thus it could help the L2 teacher in

the decision to incorporate PF in their teaching practice if found to be of significance and value to them.

This current study aimed to explore (a) what adult Egyptian L2 writers believe regarding receiving feedback from their peer versus from their teacher, (b) what writing features are mostly prioritized in the PF versus those in the TF, (c) the uptake of PF versus TF, and lastly (d) gender differences in the perceptions of PF versus TF. The research questions (RQs) compiled for this study are:

RQ1: What are adult Egyptian L2 writers' perceptions of peer and teacher feedback?

RQ2: According to adult Egyptian L2 writers', which writing features do both peers and teachers focus on/prioritize?

RQ3: What are adult Egyptian L2 writers' perceptions of uptake of the writing feedback received from peers versus that received from teachers?

RQ4: To what extent do female and male L2 writers perceive PF and TF differently?

4. The Sample of Participants

The sampling strategy adopted in this research study was the nonprobability sampling (Creswell, 2003). In nonprobability sampling, both convenience sampling and snowball sampling were utilized to collect data. The sample was a group of 81 mixed gender adult L2 learners, enrolled in general English language courses at the SCE of AUC. The participants, mostly the researcher's former students, practiced peer feedback activities in the course of their learning at the SCE; however, students at the LD do not receive official training on PF; they receive instructions from their instructor to provide holistic feedback, or to provide feedback targeting a certain writing feature in accordance with the lesson's learning outcome. For the purpose of this study, only participants' holistic feedback was utilized for data analysis.

The participants were all 18 years old or above: Some were senior high school students, some university students, and some were working professionals. Hence, adults of diverse educational, socioeconomic, and cultural background took part through the data collection instrument that was electronically sent to them directly by the researcher. The researcher disseminated one of the research instruments through virtual groups on one of the well-known multiplatform messaging mobile phone applications (i.e., WhatsApp).

5. Data Collection Instruments

The data collection instruments employed in this study were three different tools. The researcher used (a) a questionnaire comprising 35 items of different question types, and adapted from previous studies to enquire about the general perceptions of PF and TF, the perceptions of PF and TF uptake, and the impact of gender on those perceptions; (b) a face-to-face interview on an online meeting platform, containing seven questions to investigate qualitatively the general perceptions of PF versus TF, the writing features that L2 writers found to be the most focused on in PF and TF, and the differences in how genders perceive PF and TF; and (c) 16 writing samples from three various proficiency levels to discover the difference in what PF focused on as opposed to TF.

6. Data Analysis Techniques

The responses collected from the questionnaire were exported to an MS Excel spreadsheet and coded for data analysis. For single-answer multiple choice items, each answer was given a code from 1 to 3 for the three-choice item, and from 1 to 4 for the four-choice one. On the other hand, questionnaire items allowing for checking more than one answer were binary coded, where (0) meant that an answer was not checked, and (1) meant that it was. Frequency, *t*-tests, and Chi-square tests were run on the data through SPSS statistical software, version 23. The values of the mean, standard deviation, mode and *p*-value were calculated to obtain the study results.

The responses of interviews were treated differently. In total, seven learners were interviewed: three males and four females in two proficiency levels (i.e., B1 and B2), age groups, and educational backgrounds. The digital files of the recorded interviews from the online meetings were exported to electronic transcription software to generate transcribed interviews. The transcription of interviews was reviewed to remove interjections and mannerism, and to adjust verb conjugations. Following that, the transcription of all seven interviews was exported to an MS Excel spreadsheet to spot the patterns of answers and the commonality within each question of all seven learners. Codes were then established within which the answers were categorised.

As for the writing samples, the researcher collected 16 writing samples produced during writing in-class tasks done by the SCE's LD learners. The writing samples were from A2, B1 and B2 learners who collaborated to write essays of different lengths. Each sample was in two copies: one was corrected by the peer and the other by the researcher himself. The feedback was categorised into eight categories: vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, linking, coherence, capitalization, prepositions, and spelling. The feedback under each category was manually counted once in the peer copy and another in the researcher copy.

7. Delimitations of the Study

Ideally, research studies have delimitations. Firstly, this current research focused exclusively on adult Egyptian L2 learners, i.e., senior high school students, university students, and graduate learners from all educational, and professional backgrounds. Secondly, the study comprised participants who mostly have common socioeconomic standard as they all study general English at AUC. The study lastly examined one classroom practice of L2 teaching in Egypt: Receiving written feedback only, and not the oral one, from a classmate and how that was perceived.

Conclusions

1. General Perceptions of PF Versus TF

The first research question that this study was designed to investigate was the general perceptions of peer feedback in comparison to teacher feedback. The study participants believed in the importance of TF slightly more than PF. They praised TF as being more accurate, more systematic as it followed a rubric, and more reliable as the teacher is well trained to provide structured feedback that targets the core of the error. Consistent with the literature, this finding aligns with Tsui and Ng's (2000) study and with that of Yang et al.'s (2006). L2 writers did not believe that PF was more important; however, some of them were

of the opinion that both were equally valuable in the course of improving their writing. That was also evident through the interviews as the responses pointed out balanced views of both feedback types.

The perceptions of the peer’s ability to give feedback were enquired about in this study. The views were almost neutral, and this is a general indication that the absolute confidence in PF is still lacking. In addition, interviewees believed that the peer was not qualified to give feedback as the peer tended to provide superficial comments, not targeting the core of the writing process. Moreover, provided that some peers were not careful with their choice of words when providing PF, some negative comments would be discouraging to some writers; and some peers tended to be adamant that their feedback was correct without showing tolerance towards other opinions.

In addition to the above, the acceptance and use of PF and TF were also investigated. As illustrated in Figure 1, acceptance of TF was slightly higher than PF. The results showed that, while L2 writers *always* accepted their teacher’s feedback, and *always* used it to improve their writing proficiency, the acceptance of peer feedback was *often*, and they *sometimes* used it.

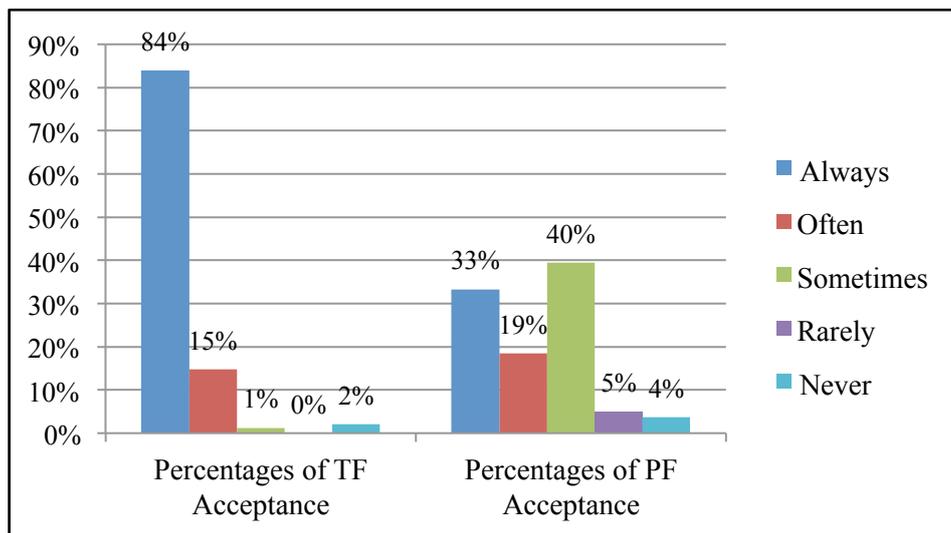


Figure 1: The Difference in TF and PF Acceptance by L2 Writers

However, when asked whether they would discuss the feedback after receiving it from their peer or their teacher, L2 writers had the same opinion regarding both types (as demonstrated in Figure 2), and their choices oscillated between *often* and *sometimes*. This could indicate a prevalent behaviour of not discussing the feedback received. This can be also explained in the same way that Zhao (2010) explained their research outcome by saying that some learners were unwilling to challenge the teacher, and to investigate more about the error in question (due to the conventional dominant role of the teacher that many students believe in).

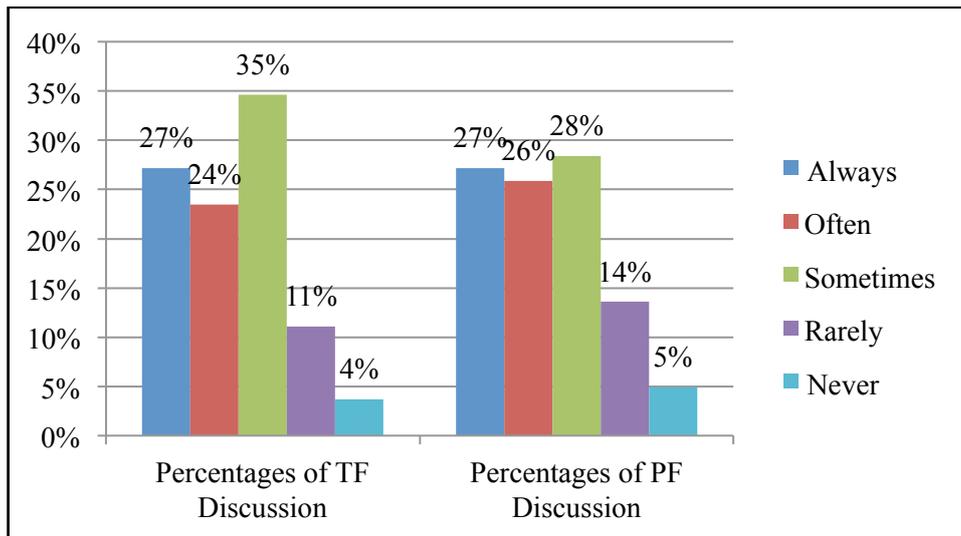
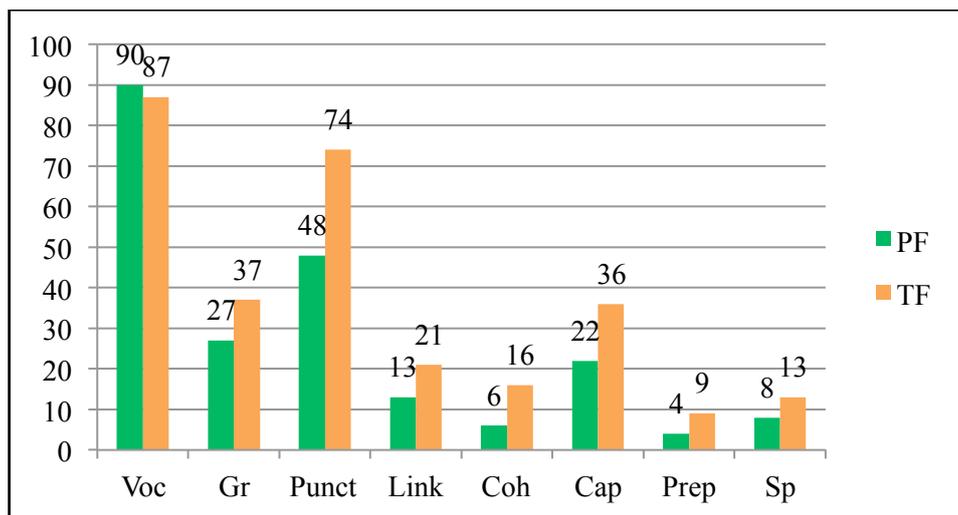


Figure 2: The Difference in TF and PF Discussion by L2 Writers

2. The Peer's Versus The Teacher's Prioritization of Writing Features in Feedback

The second research question was framed to compare between the peer and the teacher from the perspective of what they focus on in their feedback provision. To locate those writing features that both parties prioritize, the sample of L2 writers were interviewed, and writing samples from real in-class tasks were analysed.

As mentioned earlier, 16 writing samples from A2, B1 and B2 levels were garnered for this study. Each writing sample was in two copies: One for the peer and one for the teacher (i.e., the researcher) to provide feedback. A count of the instances of errors was carried out for each of the two copies to pinpoint how PF and TF differed in their focus of feedback attention. As illustrated in Figure 3, PF and TF focused on the same writing features.



Note. $N = 16$ samples; Voc = Vocabulary; Gr = Grammar; Punct = Punctuation; Link = Linking; Coh = Coherence; Cap = Capitalization; Prep = Preposition; Sp = Spelling

Figure 3: The Count of Error Instances of Eight Writing Features as Highlighted in PF Versus TF

This finding was also reported in Nelson and Murphy's (1993) research that indicated that in 50% of the cases, the peer and the teacher provided feedback on the same areas. Therefore, the peer's ability to highlight errors was palpable, and the similarity between the prioritization of both parties was significant. This further implies that PF has the potential to be as valuable as TF provided that the peer was trained adequately on that.

3. The Effect of Beliefs on Learner Uptake of PF Versus TF

The third research question tackled the uptake of PF and TF. Referring to the literature of uptake and its relation with L2 learners' beliefs about feedback, Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) stated that "research that looks more closely at how learners' beliefs and goals impact their decisions is needed to understand how and why learners respond to different forms of CF [(classmate feedback)]" (p. 304). Interestingly in this study, while more L2 writers believed that the teacher was always right and that the TF they received highlighted errors that were new for them to know about, they were inclined towards rejecting PF that did not match the previous knowledge they already had about the language. This specific finding supports evidence from previous research, such as that of Hyland (1998) who reported learners' rejection of feedback that contradicted with previous knowledge that they had about the language. On the contrary, a very small number of participants believed that both PF and TF were not needed as errors would be corrected by more practice and time. Those results represent some beliefs in the value of PF because both PF and TF recorded the same mean value when asked to choose whether there was no need for PF and TF.

4. Reactions Towards PF and TF

The second factor playing a role in the uptake of feedback is how L2 writers reacted towards PF versus TF. Two items in the questionnaire examined reactions, and asked participants whether they read carefully the feedback they received for the purpose of incorporating it in future writing tasks, or they did not generally use it. The data analysis recorded no significant difference between PF and TF with respect to that factor. However, the mean value showed slight numerical difference indicating that PF is marginally behind TF in that respect. The participants' choice of reading TF carefully for future use was more conclusive than the choice of reading PF carefully, but the difference in percentages was quite minimal (i.e., 88.6% TF, and 80.5% for PF). This finding is consistent with Wu's (2006) study finding: Wu reported that both sources of feedback generated the same results in a study focusing on L2 adult learners, i.e., learners' reaction towards both PF and TF on their writing composition was similar.

5. The Role of Motivation in the Uptake of PF and TF

The uptake of feedback relies on the level of motivation of L2 writers. Two items gauged how motivated and encouraged to write better the participants felt after receiving PF and TF. Interestingly, both items scored the same percentage (81%), which indicated a high level of motivation and encouragement to incorporate the feedback received from either the peer or the teacher in future writing tasks (The *t*-test showed no significant difference between PF and TF in that respect). The results of these two items also provide supporting evidence that PF is gaining traction and is considered as valuable as TF. Two more items, looked into motivation, and investigated the effect of encouraging commentary, such as *good job*, *well done*, and *excellent*, on the uptake of PF and TF. The percentage of choice of TF (97.5%) showed stronger tendency towards the option that reflected their motivation to do better in

future tasks. In contrast, PF recorded a different percentage (82.7%), and that indicated a slightly less ability for those positive commentary phrases to motivate L2 writers. A possible interpretation of those results can be the fact that those phrases of motivation are typically expected from the teacher, and are inherently a part of their notion of feedback from the teacher, and not from the peer.

6. Gender Differences and the Perceptions of PF and TF

The last research question in this research study aimed at exploring any differences in how male and female L2 writers perceive PF and TF. No significant differences between males and females were recorded in (a) their general perceptions of PF and TF, (b) the writing features they perceive to be prioritized by the peer or by the teacher, and (c) their perceptions of uptake of PF and TF. Those balanced perceptions of PF and TF broadly support the view of Noroozi et al. (2020) who found that females and males benefitted similarly from feedback. For instance, Figures 4 and 5 below illustrate the results of two questionnaire items, indicating no significant difference between female and male participants.

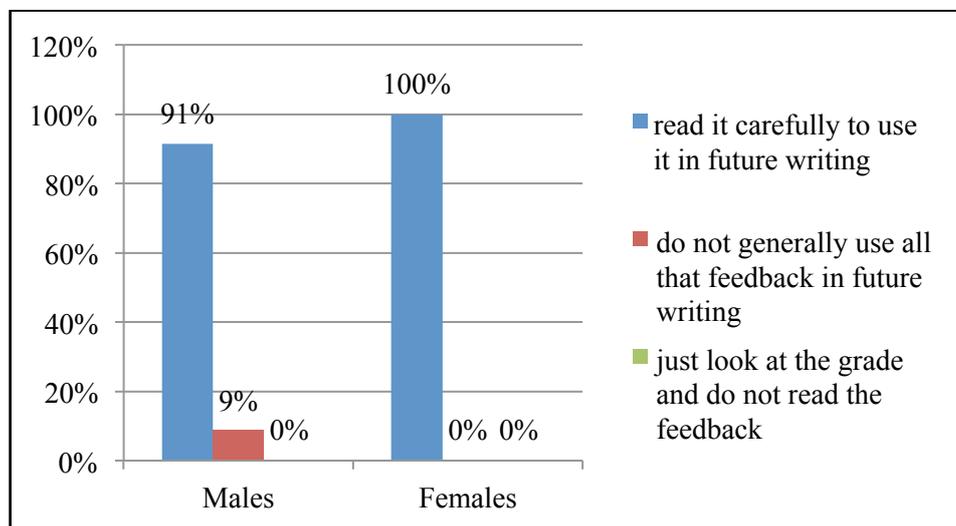


Figure 4: L2 Writers' Gender Difference in Terms of Using TF in Future Writing

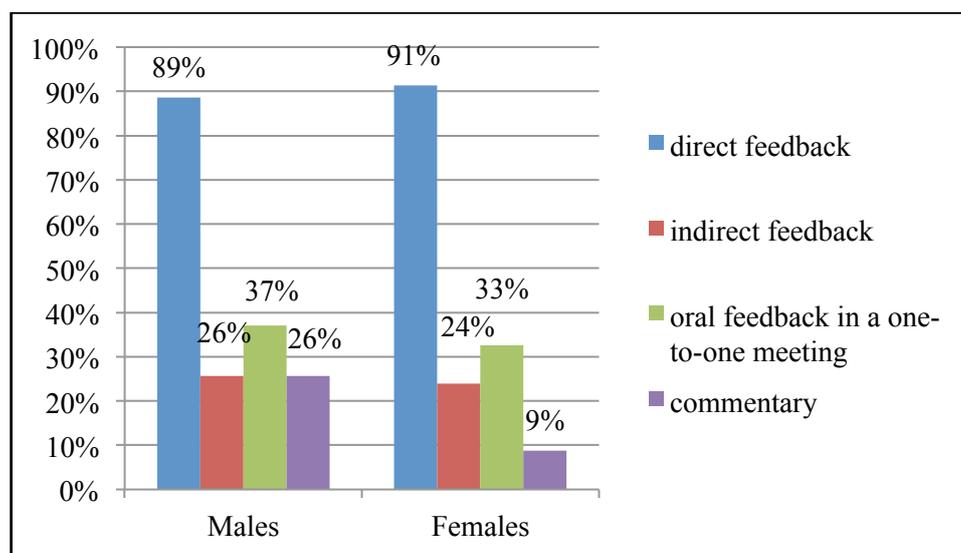


Figure 5: L2 Writers' Gender Difference in Terms of TF Type

Although the quantitative data suggested no significant gender differences, the qualitative data, collected through one-to-one interviews, illustrated otherwise. Females and males reported diverse responses to that question. Although female participants generally were of the opinion that L2 writers perceive feedback differently owing primarily to personality differences and not to gender, males' perspective was that the gender factor did make a difference in that respect. The reason for this is not quite clear, but it may be due to what males feel innately that they are more flexible and tolerant to feedback and critique than females. As one participant responded: "Females are not flexible in accepting feedback. However, males have toleration because they face a lot of situations so they can be flexible." It could be that females do not innately feel the same.

7. Study Implications

Following the analysis of the data, presenting the results, and putting plausible interpretations on those results, it is essential to study how those results can impact teaching practices. The study carries implications of use that L2 educators and all concerned stakeholders can benefit from.

The most obvious finding to emerge is that there is a noticeably high level of awareness among L2 writers of the importance of PF. This is a positive outcome for L2 educators as having a considerable level of acceptance of PF among learners means that they are prepared to become more autonomous, and they prove to be increasingly willing to interact and exchange knowledge.

Furthermore, the results of this research imply that learners can benefit from PF to become better writers. As posited by Liu and Carless (2006) and Yu and Lee (2014), more consistent practice of PF can give impetus to the quality that L2 writers provide in their writing, and can encourage them to exert more effort when they know that their piece of writing will be reviewed by the peer.

Upon realizing that awareness of peer feedback is increasing, and that the gap between it and TF is becoming narrower, curriculum designers—a major stakeholder—can potentially include writing practice activities that encompass L2 writers critiquing each other's production. Furthermore, they can allocate sections in language textbooks for the teacher to train learners on how to give peer feedback through activities that the teacher performs with learners to engage them in the practice.

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