Investigating Teachers' Perceptions on Written Feedback Practices in Malaysian Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study is to investigate teachers' perceptions and practices about teacher-written feedback in a secondary school in Malaysia. There are empirical studies conducted on the effective teacher-written feedback practices to the students' writing performance.. However, there is a little study was conducted in Malaysia on teachers' perceptions regarding the role of teacher-written feedback in writing. Teachers' perceptions and practices on written feedback is important to determine how teacher-written feedback place in their formative assessment. The results suggest that written feedback is commonly practiced in writing classroom and the teacher's perceptions influenced to teacher-written feedback practices. It was found that most teachers consider written feedback is ineffective practices to help students to improve their writing. Teachers recognised that because of time constraints and students attitude influence the effectiveness of the written feedback to the learning process. Several factors were found to have a great influence on the amount and quality of written feedback. The most significant factor was trainings to influence teachers' perception indicating that teacher-written feedback is unimportant in which was influenced teachers' practices in the classrooms.

Keywords: Teacher perceptions, teacher practices, teacher-written feedback

1. Background

Previous research focused on how to provide effective feedback in order to promote learning (Black&William, 1998; Hatie, 2012; Hattie & Timperly, 2007) but the importance of teachers' perceptions cannot be ignored as cited in Seden & Svaricek (2018). The teacher's perceptions is proven to be critical as the quality of the feedback depending on how teachers implement in the classroom. According to Diaz, Martinex, Roa & Sanhueza (2010), the teacher perceptions are useful in understanding and addressing classroom issues. Fulmer, Lee and Tan (2015) claimed that teachers' perceptions about feedback tended to reflect their social, historical and cultural priorities.

The essential of having this research is to provide an insight on how teachers operationalized in practice based on their perceptions in providing written feedback. Teachers' perceptions influences their practice in the classroom to the way the teacher thinks and acts toward a particular topic (Carlgren, Handal & Vaage, 1994). In line with the objective of Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) in producing effective writers, the government has reformed the assessment from summative to formative assessment. The schoolteachers are entrusted by the MoE to assess students' writing and improve their writing skill.

Formative assessment is an "encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/by their students, which provide

information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p 7 – 8). It is an assessment for learning to inform the teachers and students on the learning goal, intentions or outcomes and criteria to achieve the goal. The key elements are the identification by teachers & students of learning goals, intentions or outcomes and criteria; rich conversations between teachers and students that continually build and go deeper; the provision of effective, timely feedback to enable students to advance their learning; the active involvement of students in their own learning; and teacher responding to identified learning needs and strengths by modifying their teaching approaches (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Formative assessment is a tool that allows teachers to engage individual student in thinking about specific aspects of their learning. It is mainly to support learning and one of the most effective methods to encourage student achievement (Hattie, 2009), Some educational reforms clearly recognized the significance of formative assessment and feedback (Black & Wiliam, 2006). The reform in assessment is to support the development of 21st century skill towards problem-based and inquiry-based learning. This assessment creates opportunities to promote the development of student's skills of explaining, interpreting and reasoning (Bulunuz, Karagoz & Tavsanli, 2016).

The formative assessment has shifted from teacher to student-centered. Teachers' understanding for student-centered teaching strategies has an impact on their implementation of formative assessment practices. The implementation of formative assessment has changed the way in which teachers provide feedback to students. Due to assessment change, it is important to teachers to understand the characteristics of useful feedback to serve the formative assessment paradigm. It has been shown to have a substantial influence on learning outcomes and student development in which influence varies based upon how the feedback is given (Hattie & Gan, 201). Furtak (2006) found that the teachers experienced difficulties in adapting their new practice and suggested that they need to learn strategies that could support them to withhold the right practices. Therefore, it is important to explore in the Malaysian context

in which the traditional assessment remains predominant. Teachers' insufficient knowledge and understanding on formative assessment indicated that most of them often fell into the traditional practices (Roehrig and Luft, 2004). By investigating teachers' practices and knowledge on written feedback is able to examine what kind of assessment practice they adapted in their classroom.

2. Teacher-Written Feedback

The assessment is shifting from summative to formative assessment to one that focuses on feedback provided to students. The focus on written feedback is to allow the teachers to reach out their students in order to facilitate learning. In secondary schools, the students need to be provided with an adequate and effective feedback on their writing to help them to develop their English writing skills. Without a proper guidance, students may not develop their academic writing skill and consequently having difficulty in tertiary level. To overcome this problem, the role of written feedback is important to help both teachers and students in their learning process. It helps the students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and build their competent in writing (as cited in Gul, Tharani, Rizvi & Ali, 2016). The feedback is given to engage teachers frequently to identify students' performance, expectations, measure their level of understanding and become alert of misconceptions (Mason & Burning, 2001). Feedback is a powerful component to successful teaching, and it is essential to improve student in learning (Hattie & Timperly, 2007). It is defined as information given by the teachers to students during the learning and teaching process until the completion of the task (Wiggins, 2012). Feedback is provided to students throughout their learning journey (Sadler, 2010). The frequent feedback is essential to students to understand where and how to improve their performance during the learning processes. The learning goal is delivered at the end of the learning process. It helps the teachers to communicate with the students to identify and address their errors effectively for the purpose of improving learning (Shute, 2008). The teachers provide the students with information specific to their understanding or performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It

can be formal or informal feedback provided to the students and it gives the significant impact throughout the learning towards their goal.

Written feedback is to facilitate writing development which is an essential part of a student's academic development (Russell, 2002). In formative assessment, the process approach to writing is not a new approach as it has been applying since the early 1970s. The process approach requires a multiple-draft process consisting prewriting and the feedback on the various drafts through the writing process until to end-product. The purpose of feedback to provide students with information regarding their performance while they are in the process of working towards a learning target (Marzano, 2010). Feedback is the information given to a student during learning process on a completed assignment (Wiggins, 2012). The feedback is a fundamental element of a process approach to writing to provide input to the students. Flower (1979) defined it as comments, questions and suggestion from a reader to a writer to produce 'reader-based prose'. Providing feedback in writing helps the students to learn where their writing is misled or confused the reader. Feedback assists the students to provide enough information, logical organization, development of ideas and accurate word-choice or tense in their writing. Many studies found that feedback is a powerful component in formative assessment in improving student learning (Hattie &Timperley, 2007, Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Without improper implementation, ineffective and inefficient feedback can help the students to improve their writing. In order to provide a meaningful feedback to the students, teachers need to employ the characteristics of effective feedback.

Effective practices of teacher-written feedback play a key role in initiating and continuously modifying the teaching practices. Previous studies shown that the effective feedback helps the students to improve their learning's gap (Hattie & Timperly, 2007, Wiggins, 2012) but there is a gap in the research that investigate teachers' understanding influence teachers' practices on teacher-written feedback. Teachers may feel that the written feedback provided is useful in improving student learning. However, if it is provided without integrating with effective written feedback characteristics, the feedback can be meaningless to students. Teachers' insufficient understanding on teacher-written feedback can impact on their practices. Even though feedback has been a part of the language assessment system for many years and a mediator between teachers and students, it has not always been advantages to student's performance. Improper feedback or inappropriate feedback is proven disadvantages because it may have an unwanted adverse effect and stop the growth of the students' performance. It can cause students feel demotivated to learn and refuse to receive the feedback (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). The meaningful feedback helps students to pursue to advance towards the next level of study, but the inappropriate feedback may prevent students from moving to the next level of study. Due to the assessment change, teachers' understanding of effectiveness feedback is important for integrating them into their learning pedagogy. Teachers need to learn strategies that could help them to provide effective written feedback. It gives meaningful learning throughout the student-learning journey (Brown, Harris & Harnett, 2012). The type and quality of feedback are fundamental to the success of feedback which influence students' performance and the intended goal.

It is undeniable that feedback is vital to students' performance, but the effective practice depends on the teachers' implementation. Even though feedback has been a part of the education system for years, it has not always benefited to the learning process when the practice is implemented wrongly. Teachers' understanding determines the effectiveness of the practices. Lacking trainings and professional developments on written feedback causes of discrepancies in the practices. With the new assessment practices like the implementation of teacher-written feedback requires proper trainings and courses to improve teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge (Thacker, 2017). The professional development should be on going trainings to support the teachers as they implement change into their practice (Thacker, 2017). Teachers who are lack of knowledge avoids utilizing feedback in their teaching pedagogical. The improper feedback causes of misleading to the perception that feedback is not useful (Hauer & Kogan, 2012).

Extensive studies were conducted worldwide on the use of written feedback in writing but there are a few studies conducted in Malaysian secondary school teachers on teachers' written-feedback understanding influence their written feedback practices in formative assessment. Some studies claimed that teachers are incapable of giving proper feedback especially in grammatical feedback (Lee, 2004; Truscott, 1996) and lead to develop idiosyncratic feedback practices (Iqbal, Gul, Lakhani, Rizvi, 2014). Others have suggested that teachers who lack of understanding on the practices are incapable of making sense of the feedback given (Cohen & Robbins, 1976). Insufficient information on the practices found that the teachers do not apply written feedback practices in writing classroom. In order to understand teachers practices, the first question is to explore is how much knowledge teachers understand on written feedback?

The research aims to gain a better understanding on Malaysian secondary school teachers' perceptions of teacher-written feedback in formative assessment. It is important to understand the influence of teacher's perceptions and practices. Teacher's practices from traditional grading system with grades and scores to guiding feedback towards improvement (Marzano, 2006).

4.   Teacher Perceptions

Written feedback is one of the most important tasks and required teachers to provide to their student (Ferris, 2006). Teachers' perceptions is important and useful to create an effective teaching and learning process. Providing feedback on student writing is one of the pedagogical practices in improving their writing skills and grammatical accuracy (Bitchener, 2012). The perception relates to the practices play an important roles (Fosnot, 1996) in teachers' pedagogical practices (Borg, 2003, 2006; Johnson 1994; Farrell & Kun, 2008, Pajare, 1992). Borg (2003, 2006, 2012; Pajares, 1992) as cited in Al-Bakri (2016) mentioned that teachers' perceptions is a teacher cognition in general education and language teaching education. Investigating teachers perceptions about written feedback help this research to discover how teachers provide written feedback. Perceptions is "a route, experience which gradually clarifies itself, which gradually rectifies itself and proceeds by dialogue with itself and with other" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 21).   Burn (1992) mentioned that teaching perceptions are often influenced teaching practices. However, there were a few studies found discrepancies between teachers' perception and practices of written feedback (Lee, 2009, Gul and Rodrigues, 2012, Iqbal et al, 2014, Phipps, Hyland, 2013b and Borg, 2009). In previous research discussed on written feedback to its effectiveness, focus, types, students' and teachers' preferences and teachers' beliefs. The findings of these studies are vast but there is no inconclusive result but teachers continue giving feedback to the students because they believed it can help to improve students' writing (Brown, 2007). The effectiveness of written feedback does not only depend on the type of feedback but it also related to teachers' perceptions. Research on teachers' perceptions on written feedback and the impact their perceptions on their practices has received little attention (Lee, 2003, 2009). Therefore, this research examining teachers' perceptions of written feedback practices in relation to students learning and how these practices influence their perception in Malaysia.

4.   Methodology of Research
Semi-structured interview protocol

This research was conducted in the secondary school English language teachers in Malaysia. The targeted population of this research consisted of 30 teachers from 30 different secondary schools in Selangor. The reason of choosing this population because teachers have to provide their students with written feedback on writing tasks and this would be an appropriate sample of this research. Those teachers were chosen from a long list of head of language panel at different secondary schools in Selangor, Malaysia. The consent letter was sent through WhatsApp to 30 teachers and only six teachers (female) from six different schools voluntary agreed to participate in this research. The teachers were busy preparing the standard operation procedure for school re opened during Movement Control Order is the main reason for the low participation.   The purpose of this research is to explore teachers' perception and practices of written feedback. It also aims to

explore the challenges they might encounter during the practices. A qualitative approach is used for this study to answer these research questions: (a) What are the teachers' practices of providing written feedback? and (b) How do English language teachers perceive written feedback? These questions were answered by six English language teachers in Selangor. The qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interview.

With the research questions as guided, the instrument was constructed a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of 3 questions and each item on the interview was designed to probe the research questions from the various views. The interview consisted three sections: background information, teachers' understanding regarding the understanding on written feedback practices and teachers' perceptions of written feedback. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because it "combines a certain degree of control with a certain amount of freedom to develop the interview" (Wallace, 1998, p. 147). The development of interview questions is relevant to the literature and designed to elicit information about an overall picture of teachers' perceptions and understanding of written feedback practices in order to be able to address the research questions of the research. In this research study, semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone conversation because of freedom and ease the participants feel when interviewed, furthermore the constraints of social distancing during Covid-19 Movement Order Control (MCO) in Malaysia, face-to-face interviews with teachers were not possible. The interview questions were piloted before its actual interview with one writing teacher participated in this research. The interview took within 30 minutes each were recorded for transcription and data analysis. The data were coded and validated by the participants to ensure it was accurately transcribed in order to increase the validity of the results.

6.   Data Analysis

This research employed a thematic approach in analyzing interview data. Thematic is a method used to identify, analyse and report pattern (themes) within data (Clark and Brown, 2006). The interview questions were categorised under larger themes such as trainings, time, teachers and students perception of written feedback practices. This method is flexible in obtaining rich, detailed and complex data (Boyatzis, 1998). The transcripts were read and label them with an informative label (Dörnyei, 2007). Creswell (2007) stated that "during this process of describing, classifying and interpreting, qualitative researchers develop codes or categories and to sort text or visual images into categories" (p. 152). The comments were highlighted and classified all labels into themes according to the research questions and the aim of the study (Cohen, Manion & Morisson, 2007).

Written texts were marked by the teachers according to a writing marking rubric from Ministry of Education. The written texts were used to identify teachers written feedback practices by investigating the amount of feedback without analysing written feedback strategies. This research is to get a clear picture the extent usage of written feedback in their writing. This analysis was to compare both sets of data to identify mismatches between teachers' perceptions (interview) and teachers' practices (students' writing samples).

7.   Findings
Semi-structured interview

The aim of interview is to investigate teachers' perceptions and understanding of written feedback in formative assessment. The interview analysis shown the participants' on written feedback practices. Six English language secondary schools teachers were interviewed. The demographic data shows that two participants are below 30 years old, three participants are between 31 – 40 years old and one participant is above 40 years old. There are 3 participants with below 10 years teaching experience and another three are above 10 years teaching experience. All the participants are female teachers.

Participant	Gender	Age	Teaching experience
Teacher 1	Female	27	3
Teacher 2	Female	30	5

Teacher 3	Female	35	10
Teacher 4	Female	38	12
Teacher 5	Female	40	11
Teacher 6	Female	54	20

Table 1: Demographic data of the participants

Research question 1 is about teachers' perceptions on written feedback practices. To answer this question, there were 3 questions were grouped into section where each information shared a common theme. Those questions related to the teachers' perceptions perceived, how they put it on practice and the issues occurred in written feedback practices.

The participants stated that they realised the students are less concern on the feedback rather than final grade. They seem apathetic to feedback as part of writing process. Participants affirmed that there is no revision made due to time consuming. The participant responded that the written feedback is ineffective because students did not care to read the feedback and the mistakes they made. They are happy to see their mark rather than paying attention of the feedback given. Therefore, the participants just spent less effort on written feedback practices and focus on product writing rather than process writing. In fact, as one participant described it, absence of students' attitude leads to absence of written feedback:

> *I admit that feedback is very important to help the students to improve their writing, but if the students do not anticipate in this learning process, it found meaningless to provide feedback to them. They did not bother to read the feedback given to them because their focus was on their grades. It seems pointless to put an effort and allocate the time to give them feedback.*

In regards to student's attitude, teachers view that written feedback is ineffective in learning process. This is because they felt that the students do not bother on the feedback given.

According to teachers' experience, they claimed that written feedback didn't help students in learning. Teachers also realised that the process of providing feedback is less effective, 100% of participants reported giving oral feedback in their classroom because less effort and time; easier and quick method to compare to written feedback. Teachers described that it was hard to provide timely feedback especially in big size of classes. They admitted the written feedback provided to students were vague because specific and effective feedback consume a lot of time. The writing revisions and follow-up sessions are extremely difficult to provide to the students because of overloaded work to meet schools administration' deadline. In fact, as one participant responded it, time consuming is a main challenge leads to absence of written feedback:

> *I am unable to give detailed feedback to all my students…..there are 5 English classes with once a week writing task ….just imagine how to mark all the papers with feedback because other administrative works also have deadlines to meet. Since the students seemed do not care about the feedback, I minimised comments..*

The findings reveal that there was no trainings provided mainly for written feedback practices. They added that no enforcement on the written feedback from schools. The first introduction of training was in 2018 which focused on formative assessment with less emphasize on feedback. Responding on the professional development, four out of six participants stated that they have had only one training conducted by the Ministry of Education and there was no more training given specifically on teacher-written feedback practices. Having less background knowledge on the effective feedback causes barrier to teachers which can slow down the process of feedback. The formative assessment training was conducted by Malaysian Ministry of Education to the selected teachers and they cascaded the information to other teachers at their respective schools. Four of the participants claimed that the information disseminated at the school level was less input to compare to district level. No standardised policy

on teacher-written feedback has given problem to the teachers to adopt the practices in the writing classroom and may lead students to ignore the feedbacks from teachers (Wiliam, 2003). The data collection indicated that teachers perception towards written feedback practices are positively influence students' performance. Contrary to the studies conducted by Johnstun (2009), Montgomery and Baker (2007) and Lee (2011) as cited in Stromberg (2013) mentioned that teacher practice often differed from teacher perception.

Writing samples

From the analysis reveals that teachers provided a same approach in writing task. The students completed the assignment at home and submitted to the teachers for feedback. It found that there were no multiple drafts on the writing tasks. The writing was corrected by the teachers and returned to the students for the next writing task. All teachers mentioned that they do not ask their students to submit drafts but only one final product. There is no policy indicated that there is compulsory to ask students to revise their writing task. Therefore, the teachers do not ask for multiple drafts from the students. However, the students are encouraged to do correction. In general, only two out of ten students did their revision on writing tasks, but the teachers do not re-mark their assignment. It can be concluded that the teachers applied a product-oriented approach rather than process-oriented approach. In written feedback theory, revision is one of the important components and the teachers require to give feedback to each writing task and to do revision to help students to improve their writing skill. In the development of writing, formative assessment focus on process writing rather than product writing.

It found that most participants provide nominal amount of feedback. They used symbols, underline and circle on written tasks. The reason providing less amount of feedback because they

believe that students can only learn if they correct their own mistakes without teachers' help. Another participant mentioned that giving less feedback is helpful to the large number of students. It seems the teachers provided the similar type of feedback to their students. The teachers used to their own ways that they have developed to provide written feedback. They claimed that a few factors influenced their practices of written feedback such as time consuming, workload, teacher motivation and student motivation. Self-efficacy also influenced them in providing feedback. Lack of understanding on the written feedback has given constraint for the teachers to provide feedback to the students. Lack of knowledge on the practices affected to teachers' confidence in providing a proper feedback.

The aim of the written texts analysis of 45 was to identify the actual written feedback practices (9 texts per teacher). The analysis was only focus on the numbers of amount feedback without analyzing on what types of feedback (grammar, mechanics, words/expressions and sentence structure) the teachers provided on students' writing. Based on the analysis shows that the teachers provided a small amount of feedback on their students' writing. Most of them focused their written feedback on errors by underlining and circling without telling which area that the students need to improve. Most of the samples of writing were given same feedback by the teachers. However, only two teachers wrote positive feedback to encourage the student by telling their strength in writing. Overall, the findings show that teachers gave mostly less amount of feedback. It can be concluded that the teachers are still influenced by traditional grading assessment which focus on product than the process of writing. The teacher neglected revision processes in written feedback practices which is the main element of formative assessment.

Amount of feedback provided	No of writing	Percentage (%)
< 5	29	64
6 – 10	13	29
>10	3	7
Total sample of writing	*45*	*100*

Table 2: Amount of feedback in each sample of writing

8. Discussion and conclusions

The main focus of this research was to examine teachers' perception of written feedback practices. The participants perceived the written feedback was not a significant to students' learning. The students concerned on the grade rather than the feedback given. It is evident that most of the participants only provided a nominal feedback to the students and ten of the writing samples were found no feedback given by the teachers.

One important findings in this research is that there was no revision processes applied in which it is a vital and important in written feedback practices. Revision encourages students to write multiple drafts and to revise their writing several times in order to produce a better writing (Russell & Spada, 2006). With regards to the above, the participants expressed their feeling that the schools need to provide support to teachers to dedicate their practices to writing process. School principals are an agent of change and their commitment is important (Altrichter, 2005). It plays an important role in creating positive and motivating environment. This research confirms that time is an important factor influence on written feedback practices (Truscottt, 1999). All the participants in this research shared their concern regarding time, heavy workload and deadline in implementing written feedback practices. This research confirms that time is an important factor influence on written feedback practices (Truscottt, 1999). All the participants in this research shared their concern regarding time, heavy workload and deadline in implementing written feedback practices. It was seen that the participants provided the same feedback in writing samples.

In conclusion, the research indicated that the teachers' perceptions on the written feedback is less significant in student learning and influence their practices of written feedback. It demonstrates that these teacher participants perceptions and practices are correlated. The factors such as time consuming, lack of training, students' attitude and school management have influenced their perceptions towards written feedback. Based on the findings of this research, government should organise and conduct seminars, conference and workshop regularly for teachers on proper practice of written feedback in formative assessment. This can help the teachers to learn how to use the feedback to assess the affective and psychomotor domains of students. There should be in house trainings to teach and upgrade the concept of written feedback practices to the teacher. The head of schools should motivate the teachers to put more effort in the classroom rather than administrative works. The findings revealed that the participants' written feedback practices were shaped by their perceptions about students' needs and attitudes. The constraints influence teachers' perception in which creating tensions between theory and actual practices. With these recommendations, the teachers have a better understanding about written feedback.

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