

Missing: Electronic Feedback in Egyptian EFL Essay Writing Classes

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By

Dr. Soheir Seliem

Professor of TEFL/TESOL,
Curriculum & Instruction Dept.
Faculty of Education,
Helwan University
E-mail: Dr.soheirseliem@yahoo.com

Mr. Abdelhamid Ahmed

Assistant Lecturer of TEFL/TESOL,
Curriculum & Instruction Dept.,
Faculty of Education,
Helwan University
E-mail: alagouz2006@yahoo.com

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Abstract

EFL essay writing is considered one of the most important academic courses in the teacher education programmes that should help develop students' skills to write cohesively and coherently. Teachers' feedback plays a crucial role in improving and enhancing the quality of students' written essays. The aim of the current study was to shed light on the potential of e-feedback for student teachers and their university lecturers in an EFL essay writing class at the Faculty of Education, Helwan University in Egypt. Eighty student teachers of English and seven essay writing lecturers exchanged e-mails to investigate the effect of potential of e-feedback on student teacher's performance in essay writing. Eighty student teachers completed the questionnaire, 14 student teachers and 7 essay writing lecturers were interviewed to pinpoint the effectiveness of e-feedback as a pedagogic practice in the essay writing course. Findings of the study revealed a number of issues. First, student teachers perceived lecturers' e-feedback as impacting their revision than oral feedback. Second, student teachers perceived peer e-feedback as artificial and not valuable as students are nearly the same language proficiency level. Third teachers stressed that e-feedback was a good experience but exhausting with students repeating the same mistakes. Fourth, electronic feedback as a new pedagogic practice was generally effective in terms of the following: providing positive learning environment different from the physical rigid classroom environment, encouraging students' responsibility for their own written work, facilitating peer and teacher collaboration, increasing student participation, sharing learned outcomes between students, and giving writing feedback to students electronically was a well-received and helpful pedagogic practice. Thus, the current study recommends the use of electronic feedback as a solution to help both teachers and students overcome the feedback related challenges and improve students' proficiency in essay writing.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a recent trend in higher education teaching system and increasing use of more independent teaching styles (Stephens, 1994). This has led to the development of and use of Computer Assisted Assessment (CAA) which could assist staff to assess a broadening curriculum, and possibly reduce marking workload and time pressures (Bull 1994). Computer Assisted Assessment (CAA) refers to all the various ways in which computers can be used for assessment including: first, the delivery, marking and analysis of assignments and examinations, second, the analysis of data (such as scores) that is obtained from optical mark readers (OMRs), third, the recording, analysis and reporting of results, and finally, the collation, analysis and transfer of assessment information through networks to improve the administration of student mark files (Brown, et al., 1997 & 2004). In addition, Bull (1999:3) has stated that: "Well-designed CAA can be used to improve student learning experience, develop assessment processes and provide efficiency gains for academic and support staff to keep pace with growing student numbers". The current study deals with using computer assisted assessment in the form of electronic feedback of the essay writing course to Egyptian students teachers of English at the Faculty of Education, Helwan University.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Teachers' written response continues to play a vital role in most L2 and foreign language (FL) writing classes. Many teachers feel they must write substantial comments on papers to provide a reader reaction to students' efforts, to help them improve as writers and to justify the grade they have been given (Hyland, 2003). On the other hand, university student numbers have increased within Higher Education in Egypt; there have been economies of scale in teaching methods but not in assessment (Gibbs & Simpson, 2003). This has caused tremendous pressure on assessment practices in all subject areas (Brown et al., 2004). Due to the increased amount of marking and teachers' workloads, feedback is often being provided too slowly, and lacking in the necessary quality, to be effective. In addition, reductions in the frequency and quantity of feedback to students on their learning and progress mean that feedback may be losing its formative function (Glover& Brown, 2006). The current study investigated the effectiveness of electronic feedback in the form of e-mails as a pedagogic practice to enhance university

students' quality of written essays and teachers' experiences of providing well-written and constructive feedback.

1.2 PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

The problem of the current study is concerned about the potential of e-feedback as a new pedagogic practice in EFL/ESL language learning in general and Essay Writing in particular from both student teachers and their lecturers' views. Thus, the problem of the current study is mainly represented in investigating the effectiveness of electronic feedback in the form of e-mails as a pedagogic practice to enhance students' quality of written essays and teachers' experiences of providing well-written and constructive feedback.

1.3 AIMS OF THE STUDY

The current study aims at fulfilling a number of things. First, it aims at integrating technology in language teaching and learning in general and essay writing in particular. Second, it seeks to understand student teachers and their lecturers' views about using e-feedback in developing their quality of written essays. Third, it aims at investigating students' experiences of electronic peer feedback. Finally, it aims at highlighting lecturers' experiences of providing e-feedback to their student-teachers in the essay writing course.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY AND CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The current study significantly contributes to EFL higher education in Egypt in terms of English language pre-service teacher education, educational research, and curriculum planning and design. From the perspective of English language pre- service teacher education, the current study has the potential to improve English language teacher education in a number of ways:

- a) It provides an understanding of the challenges faced by lecturers in EFL essay writing concerning using of e-feedback in assessing students writing. This will draw the attention of those interested in teaching English as a foreign language at the university level to the potential

of using electronic feedback in their courses, clarifying how electronic feedback can be used to develop the essay writing skills for student-teachers of English, upgrading the quality of the teachers of English graduates professionally as users of e-feedback in class and identifying students' attitude to different kinds of e-feedback. This, in turn, is significant for curriculum planners since it aims to provide implications for developing their writing syllabus, methods of teaching, and assessment.

- b) It also sheds light on the importance of lecturers and students- teachers' needs to implement effective e-feedback in assessing essay writing.
- c) It also highlights the significant development in the academic achievement of students in other courses due to their ability to express their ideas in well-organized essays. This will help better prepare highly qualified teachers of English.

At the level of educational research, the current study made a significant contribution summarized in two respects:

- a) It can serve as an example for further studies in education in terms of using the interpretive constructivist research framework. This approach has been totally neglected in Egypt, no previous study having used an exploratory approach to investigate the writing challenges faced by Egyptian student teachers of English.
- b) It also serves as an example of the triangulation of research methods such as questionnaires, interviews and observation. This mix of research methods has not been extensively used in Egypt before to study Egyptian participants. In reference to curriculum planning and design, the study is potentially significant as it highlights the following:
 - 1) It helps curriculum designers take into consideration students' needs and interests in designing their curriculum.
 - 2) It opens the curriculum planners and designers' minds to different approaches to the teaching and assessment of essay writing.
 - 3) It paves the way for future studies to be conducted using electronic feedback to develop other language skills.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Electronic-feedback (E-feedback) is defined as feedback in digital, written form and transmitted via the web—transfers the concepts of oral response into the electronic arena (Tuzi, 2004). In addition-feedback is part of on-line conferencing rather than one-to-one e-feedback which allows students to take a more active role. Thus, e-feedback is a hybrid of oral and written feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). E-feedback is marked by its interactive textual exchange and greater student participation (Guardada & Shi, 2007). Electronic feedback in the current study is defined as teachers' and peers' provision of written digital constructive response via e-mails to be accessed by students at their convenience.

The nature of feedback is considered an important factor in understanding effective usage of e-feedback in assessing writing. Assessment is considered a positive factor in terms of what we can expect students to learn and the style of assessment can have an important influence on student learning (Brown et al., 1997). In addition, it has been suggested that if an aspect of a course is not assessed, students will probably not learn it (Ashcroft & Palacio, 1996). So, assessment is vital for measuring the achievement of courses but what is more important for all the parties involved in the educational process is the feedback of the assessment. From an interactionist perspective, feedback is regarded as an important means of establishing the significance of students' responses in shaping new meanings (Probst, 1989). Ideally, feedback is effective if students act on it to improve their future work. Besides, learning suggests that this is most likely if feedback: is frequent, timely, sufficient and detailed enough; can be linked to the purpose of the assessment task and criteria; is understandable, given the students' level of sophistication; and focuses on learning rather than marks by relating explicitly to future work and tasks (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). In classrooms, feedback is a key element of the scaffolding provided by the teacher to build students confidence and the literacy resources to contribute in their communities. In fact, over the past twenty years, changes in writing pedagogy and insights gained from research studies have transformed feedback practices, with teacher written comments now often combined with peer feedback, writing workshops, oral-conferences, or computer-delivered feedback. Summative feedback, focusing on writing as a product, has generally been replaced or supplemented by formative feedback which points

forward to the student's future writing and the development of his or her writing processes (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The current study focuses on electronic feedback and essay writing at the university level.

There are different types of computer-mediated feedback. As technology develops and computer facilities become more widely available, the role of the computer in both delivering and mediating feedback has become more visible in practice and research. Precisely, how computers are used, however, largely depends on the underlying assumptions that teachers hold about literacy and language learning (Warschauer, 2002). There are different key areas of electronic feedback including, computer conferencing, automated feedback and corpora-based feedback. First, computer conferencing offers two broad connectivity of computer use options, either synchronous writing, where students communicate with each other or the tutor in real time via discussion software on Local Area Networks (LAN) or internet chat sites; and asynchronous writing, where students communicate in a delayed way, such as via e-mail to seek feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). As for student conferencing through the networks is also said to make discussion more 'student centred', foster a sense of community, encourage a sense of group knowledge, and increase student participation, since there are more opportunities for student-student interaction with the teacher as a facilitator (Plass & Chun 1996; Kahmi- Stein 2000; Warschauer 2002). This kind of networked communication is said to motivate less proficient students (Warschauer 2002; Greenfield 2003) and provide a non-threatening environment for students to practise their literacy skills and receive peer feedback on their work (Colomb & Simutis 1996). Finally, some researchers argue that it can lead to better writing products and more focused and better quality peer feedback (Sullivan & Pratt 1996; Braine 1997). Tuzi (2004), for instance, found that e-feedback helped L2 writers focus on larger chunks of writing and work on macro-revisions. For teachers, feedback comments are automatically stored for later retrieval, allowing them to print out the transcripts for in-class discussion. This kind of analysis of student writing can help build metacognitive awareness of particular linguistic, interactional and rhetorical features (Swaffar et al. 1998; Lamy & Goodfellow 1999; Sengupta 2001). Teachers can use this database of transcripts to increase students' autonomy in correcting errors and in

reflecting on their writing, and this can also have dramatic payoffs in self-feedback, and learner awareness of error (Yuan 2003).

The second area of concern is automated feedback. There is another area with a growing influence on feedback practices in writing is the development of sophisticated software capable of scanning student texts and generating direct evaluative comments on them. Different types of feedback are offered by such programmes, ranging from individual reports on grammatical errors, targeting ESL students (Liou 1994; Warden & Chen 1995), to holistic assessments of content, organization, and mechanics (Burston 2001).

Such programmes are helpful to Egyptian teachers with the burdens imposed by growing class sizes and increasing expectations for individualized support. For teachers they offer the possibility of break from the hours spent commenting on student papers, allowing them to focus on other aspects of their teaching, and for students they provide more extensive feedback in a much shorter turn-around time (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Generally, automated response programmes have been criticized for being unreliable (Krishnamurthy, 2005) and realising poor pedagogic principles (Chapelle, 2001), so, whether the statistical techniques they use can provide useful feedback on L2 writing is an open question (Hearst 2000). We might also wonder whether such automated feedback systems will ever be able to deal with more than a few, very narrow and questionably useful genres (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In fact, many developers of automated feedback software insist that computer-generated feedback should only be considered a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, classroom instruction (Burstein & Marcu 2003; Burstein et al. 2004).

Third electronic type of feedback is called Corpora-based feedback. Essentially, a corpus is a collection of relevant texts which can be computer searched for particular words, phrases or grammatical patterns using concordancing software to reveal their frequency and regular patterns of use with other forms. Corpora offer exciting possibilities for innovative uses of feedback in two main ways. First, by making

corpus evidence accessible during the writing process itself to increase learner autonomy and self-feedback on their work; and second, by offering teacher feedback which links electronically submitted writing directly to a concordance file.

Integrating concordancing software into the writing process can give students direct access to corpus information as they write (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Electronic corpora are becoming increasingly important in L2 writing instruction as teaching becomes less a practice of imparting knowledge and more one of providing opportunities for learning. There are a growing number of online resources that can be exploited to help students self-edit in this way, including search engines such as Google (Joyce & Weil 2000). More targeted text-retrieval sites can help students clarify the strong selectional restrictions of specific words in more specific and relevant contexts. These include WordPilot 2000 (Milton 1999), Check my words (Milton 2006) and Word neighbors (Milton 2004) all of which create a macro in word processing programmes so that writers are able to call up a concordance for a word by double clicking while they are typing. This gives them frequency and contextual information about words and expressions when they need it. More widely used are corpus-linked programmes which help teachers provide resource-assisted feedback (Hyland 2003). Encouraging students to submit their writing electronically allows teachers to hyperlink errors in an essay directly to a concordance file where students can examine the contexts and collocations of the words they have misused (Milton 1999; Hyland 2003). A sophisticated version of this is Milton's (2006) *Mark my words*, which allows teachers to insert customizable comments in any language in the student's electronic document and to link the comments to the online resources including corpus data. There is some preliminary evidence that students are able to benefit from this kind of feedback. Todd (2001) reports a study in Thailand where students were able to make inductive decisions about language use and to self-correct their common lexical errors after they had made small concordances of these items on the internet. Gaskell & Cobb (2004) also report learner self-correction of grammatical errors after tutors pasted in links to an online concordance to facilitate feedback and reflection. While the impact of these tools is an area for further investigation, they appear to offer considerable promise for supporting teacher feedback with authentic

language data. By relieving students of the need to accept the teacher's editing of their words, teachers can relinquish some control and allow students to make their own decisions about revising their texts, based on both the feedback and the authentic data. This encourages a reflective, active response to teacher's feedback which can be extremely useful for raising students' awareness of genre-specific conventions, developing independent learning skills, and improving writing products (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

There are different advantages of using electronic feedback in writing. Many educators and students alike believe that computer technology is a useful and flexible tool for language learning. In compliance with this, a handful of studies have indicated that using computers to support foreign language learning yields in enhancing student-to-student interaction (Beauvois, 1992; Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995), better performance in writing (Chun, 1994; Florez-Estrada, 1995; Itzes, 1997; Van Handle & Corl, 1998), a wider diversity of discourse functions and interactional adjustments (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998; Sotillo, 2000), and enhanced motivation for learning and practicing the target language (Kern, 1995; Gonzalez-Bueno & Perez, 2000; Matsumura & Hann, 2004). A number of studies have highlighted the significance of using electronic feedback in the field of education due to its substantial benefits and gains in the educational process (Braine, 1997; MacLeod, 1999; Hewett, 2000; DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Tuzi, 2004; and Guardado & Shi, 2007). In addition, electronic feedback allows students to take a more active role. E-feedback is a mixture of oral and written feedback which is characterized by the informality and immediacy of oral communication, the permanency of written communication, the availability at any time, and being a means for encouraging group knowledge and student participation (Warschauer & Ware, 2006). Furthermore, e- feedback gives more control and agency to students, instead of passive reliance on teacher feedback to fix their writing. It also offers alternative spaces for academic student involvement, more democratic power structures, and reduced risk environment (Selfe, 1992) and transparency, and creates audience awareness (Ware, 2004).

The software programmes have a number of features that give the Electronic Feedback method the edge over traditional 'red pen' marking. There is a variety of plagiarism detection tools that can be used to check for similarities between electronic text files. Some programmes use search engine technology to look for similar text on the web (Bull, Coughlin, Collins & Sharp, 2002). Software is capable of automatically grading written free text (Mason & Grove-Stephenson, 2002), but is still in development and is not suited to high stakes assessment at present. Besides, There are packages that work as marking assistants that can assist in the computation of student marks. These packages are used regularly by academic staff, e.g. MS Excel advanced marking assistants can generate written reports delivered via the web (Denton, 2003). This is an opportunity that allows tutors to rapidly assign the standard comments to individual students. Tutors enter the reference numbers of the standard comments they would wish to assess that class member from a drop-down picking list so the tutor is not required to memorize the reference numbers (Roth, Ivanchenko & Record, 2007). In addition, instead of entering student scores manually, % marks can be calculated automatically by activating the Automark feature. In this way, a student's final mark is determined by the feedback statements owed to them in criteria modes and teachers use these to determine the final mark (Salmon, 2002). Furthermore, this sheet gives the tutor an idea of how the standard comments have been allocated across the group. It may disclose, for example, that a particular feedback statement was allocated to a large proportion of the class and it can be used to inform future teaching strategies by directing the tutor's attention to those aspects of an assignment that caused the greatest difficulty (Denton, 2003).

There are some concerns about students' use of electronic feedback in writing assessment through computer conferencing as a replacement for more traditional forms of feedback. Belcher (1999) has cautioned that Computer conferencing feedback can face difficulty of the technologically challenged process (Lindblom-Ylanne & Pihlajamaki, 2003) and observed that their Finnish students felt threatened by sharing their drafts with peers in this way. Van der Geest & Remmers (1994) found the benefits of computer mediated peer review offset by technical problems while Braine (1997 & 2001) discovered that students in a face-to-face class produced better quality essays by the end of the semester than

students in a LAN mediated class. He attributes this to the fact that students seemed to have difficulties in following the rush of multiple discussion threads of online writing. Schools should provide training to all L2 students to learn how to respond effectively to this new kind of assessment. Most of L2 students used their feedback training to respond to each writing assignment. Training students assisted them become effective responders and highlighted areas that they needed to be concerned about when writing and responding (Berg, 1999; Stanley, 1992).

There are some concerns about teachers' attitudes towards e-feedback usage in writing assessment. Powerful new technologies can enhance instruction and learning, yet these new World Wide Web technologies are not being widely used by teachers (Wiburg, 1997). Teachers do not incorporate web resources into their teaching even though these new resources have been empirically shown to promote student level of interactivity (Hardin & Ziebarth, 1995; Owston, 1997), increase mental functioning (Conlon, 1997), and promote social interaction (Kagan & Widaman, 1987; Sharan & Kussell, 1984; Slavin, 1983). The attitudes of lecturers in one institution to changing from paper feedback to online feedback showed that the majority preferred the traditional paper method (Dommeyer 2002). This is due to potential limitation for understanding the advantages of computer-based assessment in instructional assessment results from designing comprehensive and systematic criteria for assessment of students writing (Scalise & Gifford, 2006). This can be resolved through exposing information and developing knowledge about the usefulness of using electronic feedback innovation in writing assessment (Rogers, 1995). Schools should promote the formation of various levels of knowledge about the value of web resources to teaching and learning (Koszalka, 2001). This knowledge promotes the formation of positive attitudes toward the use of innovations (Emery 1986; Rogers 1995). Furthermore, the integration of electronic feedback technology into teaching was dependent on the teacher's extent of technology application knowledge and the amount of peer support to try new applications (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1992; Ike, 1997). Thus, schools should provide opportunities for teachers for peer discussion and feedback about their use of electronic feedback in their writing assessment. Moreover, the research literature supports the premise that changing pedagogical strategies to integrate technology in the

classroom is more successful when peers collaborate, share technology successes and challenges, and practice with technology (Brisco & Peters, 1997; Clift, Veal, Johnson, & Holland, 1990; Duin, 1996; Emery, 1986; Ingesman, 1996; Kies, Williges, & Rosson, 1997; Livingston & Borko, 1989; Metzler, 1996; Riel, 1990; Smylie, 1992; Wiburg, 1997).

Effects of a change from paper feedback to e-feedback are vital in implementing effective electronic feedback assessment in writing. An important question is whether a change from paper feedback to electronic feedback affects the content of the results (Dommeyer et. al, 2004). E-feedback affected students' revisions at a higher structural level as e-feedback had a greater impact on revisions at the clause, sentence, and paragraph levels. Furthermore, e-feedback is more effective at encouraging changes at the sentence and paragraph levels (Tuzi, 2004). There is a variety of implications for L2 writing instruction and L2 writing. First, online writing and e-feedback are adequate tools for writing and receiving feedback as well as effective tools for expanding the participants of the process of learning and allowing L2 students to feel that they are writing to more than just their classmates or instructor (Tuzi, 2004). Although it is a useful tool, but it can not replace oral feedback or classroom interaction even as (Tannacito, 1999) suggested.

3. METHODOLOGY:

3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

Taking the study aims into account, the research questions of this study are as follow:

- 1- How do student-teachers perceive lecturers' electronic feedback?
- 2- How do student-teachers view peer electronic feedback?
- 3- What are lecturers' experiences of providing electronic feedback?
- 4- How effective was electronic feedback as a new pedagogic practice?

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

In view of the exploratory nature of this study, and its context-specificity, the naturalistic orientation of interpretive, qualitative research is an appropriate choice. In this study, the interpretative approach aims at understanding the context within which participants act, and understanding the process by which events and actions take place (Maxwell, 1996). The interpretative approach will help the researchers to explain from the insider's view why things have happened (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). This includes developing a description of an individual or setting by looking at the issue from different perspectives, analyzing data for themes or categories, and finally making an interpretation or drawing conclusions about the meaning personally and theoretically (Wolcott, 1994).

3.2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Within the interpretive paradigm, knowledge is viewed as being socially constructed. It endorses eclecticism and pluralism. For example, different, even conflicting, theories and perspectives can be useful; observation, experience, and experiments are all useful ways to gain an understanding of people and the world (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

As mentioned above the research design of the current study is based mainly on mixed methods. Greene et al. (1989) underscore the justification for using mixed methods stating that there are five reasons for conducting mixed methods research: (a) triangulation, (b) complementarity, (c) initiation (d) development, and (e) expansion. Similarly, as a philosophical underpinning for mixed methods studies, Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) and Patton (1990) convey the importance of focusing attention on the research problem in social science and then use pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about the problem. All these factors make combining both quantitative and qualitative methods a solid basis for educational research. In particular, the current study will follow the parallel/simultaneous mixed method design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). This design has been chosen because the quantitative and the qualitative phases of the study are conducted simultaneously. The quantitative phase is represented in the questionnaire, whereas the semi-structured interview constitutes the qualitative phase.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

3.3.1 QUESTIONNAIRE PILOTING

The questionnaire was piloted before administering to the main sample of the study. Questionnaire validity was achieved through using face validity by administering it to 7 jury members who are specialized in TESOL/TEFL. They made some modifications after which they accepted it as a valid questionnaire. As for questionnaire reliability, it was administered to a sample of 30 student teachers. Statistical analysis revealed that Alpha Cronach is (0.7) which proved reliable statistically.

As Wellington (2000) argues the research questions determine what methods are adopted. As for the first and second questions, the researchers designed a questionnaire and an interview. Accordingly, the questionnaire was administered to Egyptian student teachers of English to explore the potential of their lecturers' e-feedback and their peer e-feedback in essay writing from student teachers' perspectives (See Appendix 1). This helped decide the most important categories and themes of the semi-structured interview (See Appendices 2 & 3). Regarding the third and fourth questions, the teachers' questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews helped the researchers pinpoint the lecturers' experiences of e-feedback and its effectiveness as a pedagogic practice. Finally, the combination of mixed methods represented in the questionnaires, and the semi-structured interviews helped the researchers better understand the applicability of e-feedback within an Egyptian context from both student-teachers and their lectures' perspectives.

3.3.2 PARTICIPANTS

The participants of this study will be third year Egyptian student teachers of English at Helwan Faculty of Education in Egypt and seven essay writing lecturers at Helwan Faculty of Arts (as the Faculty of Education does not appoint essay writing lecturers) in Egypt. These lecturers were selected according to two criteria: purposiveness and accessibility (Silverman, 2001). That is to say, the students were participating in a B.Sc. Degree in TEFL education programme at the time the study was being conducted and represented half of the student teachers of English at the faculty. The lecturers were teaching essay

writing to all four years of the programme. The sample of the study consisted of both male and female students. As for the lecturers, the researchers made use of the faculty available, whether male or female. The students shared some common characteristics as they are in their early twenties, from the same Egyptian culture, but with different background knowledge, and were starting their first year in teaching practice at the preparatory schools in Cairo and Giza Governorates. Both students and lecturers were asked to fill in the questionnaire. Regarding the semi-structured interviews, fourteen student teachers and seven lecturers were interviewed.

3.3.3 PROCEDURES

Data was collected in two stages at the end of the academic year 2008, which was the first semester for third year students. In this semester, students were doing their teaching practice at schools. The procedures for this study were as follows. First, student teachers were asked to participate voluntarily in the study by exchanging e-mails between their essay writing lecturers and their peers in the essay writing class. This e-mail exchange process was based on student teachers writing of several e-mails that contain a number of written essays of students' choice. These e-mails were then sent to their essay writing lecturers and to their peers to obtain e-feedback on them. This e-mail exchange process lasted for a whole semester (i.e. 12 weeks). After that, students were asked to fill in the questionnaire, which was quantitatively analyzed. Then, fourteen student teachers as well as seven essay writing lecturers were asked to volunteer to attend the semi-structured interviews in their free time. Students' interviews were conducted in Arabic, and then translated and transcribed. However, lecturers' interviews were conducted in English and audiotaped and transcribed. The major research aims were used as guidelines for topic ordering and construction of categories (Radnor, 2001).

3.3.3.1 THE RATIONALE FOR USING THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The questionnaire is one of the most widely used and useful instruments for collecting data in L2 research. They are easy to construct, extremely versatile and uniquely capable of gathering large

information quickly in a processable form. The questionnaire of the current study contains close-ended questions which were easily coded and tabulated quantitatively leaving no room for rater subjectivity.

As for the interview, it is a flexible tool, enabling multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007). Interviews are significant in data collection because they enable participants - be they interviewers or interviewees- to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and express how they regard situations from their own viewpoint.

As Robson (2006) argues “there are three main types of interviews; the fully structured interview, the semi-structured interview and the unstructured interview” (p. 270). The current study focuses on the semi-structured interview. This is similar to the structured interview in that it has pre-determined questions, but it is more flexible: the order of questions can be modified based on the interviewer’s perception of what seems most appropriate, question wording can be changed and explanations given, particular questions which seem inappropriate to a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included. The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews makes them more suitable to the objectives of the current study. In other words, the current study methods have predetermined questions, but allowed space for modifications, deletion and inclusion of certain questions and issues.

The mixed methods of data collection mentioned above (i.e. questionnaires and semi-structured interviews) are used to explore the participants’ views and perspectives of e-feedback in EFL essay writing teaching/learning. The strengths of each of these methods make up for the weaknesses and complement them. This is why triangulation makes the study trustworthy. It gives more depth and adds vivid layers of description to the participants’ views of what is being investigated.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis of the current study follows the mixed method data analysis; that is, data is analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative data analysis, the Statistical Package for Social

Sciences (SPSS) is used, analysing the results of the close-ended items of questionnaire using descriptive and inferential statistics.

With regards to the qualitative data analysis, the semi-structured interview sessions are taped, translated, transcribed, coded and then analyzed. Radnor's method (2001) is used for analysing the data as it is logical and sequential in reaching categories and themes. This model starts with topic ordering, and then categories emerge from reading the data several times. Some categories may be clearly stated and others embedded implicitly in the responses. The broad category is divided into sub-categories. Then, reading for content allows the content to be coded in topic categories so that each statement can be allocated to a specific category. In cases where a piece of data fits into more than one category, it is coded in all the possible categories. As Holliday (2002) states "the data, commentary and argument are the building blocks of thick description" (pp.110-115). The analyses give thick layers of description and insightful views about the participants. In this way, the implications of the study are drawn out of these analyses.

3.5 ETHICAL ISSUES

The importance of ethical issues was highlighted by Robson (2006: 66) who argues that "Control over what people do obviously has a moral dimension. Ethical dilemmas lurk in any research involving people." The data collection phase involved some ethical issues that should be taken into consideration. Firstly, participants in this study were informed of the purpose of this study and that there is no risk in participating in it. They were given a consent form to read and sign to confirm their voluntary work in this study, taking into account that it is their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Secondly, participants' names were changed to maintain their confidentiality (Pring, 2000). Thirdly, the researchers asked for the participants' permission to conduct the semi-structured interview sessions. Finally, the participants were asked for permission to use quotations from their interviews.

4. STUDY FINDINGS

The current study reported the following findings from the analysis of questionnaires, and the interviews. First, student-teachers perceived lecturers e-feedback as impacting their revision (70% of the sample of the study pinpointed that this was the case with them) better than oral feedback. This implied that e-feedback might be more useful in reducing the anxiety related to receiving feedback. It also helped students focus on larger writing blocks, both corrective and constructive and improve students' grammatical and lexical structures. Analysis of the questionnaire items revealed that 80% of the study sample agreed that e-feedback has the potential to improve grammatical and lexical mistakes. It also underscored the mechanics of writing including spelling and punctuation rules. Statistical analysis was consistent with this finding as 88% of the study sample strongly agreed that e-feedback helped enhance their punctuation and spelling. This finding was clearly supported by the sample example of the following extract that was given by Fakhry:

“In fact, e-feedback was influential in improving my written essays in the revision stage. It helped me focus on my grammatical mistakes and vocabulary choice. Besides, it made me aware of some spelling and punctuation rules that I used to miss.”

Quantitative data analysis highlighted the following:

- 1- 97% of the study sample showed that e-mails exchange was frequent.
- 2- 83% of the study sample indicated that lecturers' e-feedback was useful, but 76% of the study sample considered peer e-feedback as useless and superficial that focuses on the technicalities of writing.
- 3- 65% of the study sample highlighted that e-feedback was helpful in reshaping students' ideas.
- 4- 48% of the study sample pinpointed that e-feedback was corrective whereas 73% assured that it was more of a constructive nature.

Second, students perceived peer e-feedback as artificial and not valuable as students are nearly the same proficiency level. Sometimes, it was regarded as complimentary as students do not want to upset their classmates. It was focusing on mechanics of writing rather than content and ideas, and helpful in editing vocabulary and spelling. A sample example of this view was given by Noha who said:

“Actually, my classmate’s e-feedback was not that useful to me as it was social relationships. For example, I could not frankly spot my classmate’s errors, not to upset her. I tried to be more or less focusing on my classmate’s mechanics skills in writing such as spelling and vocabulary choice. In fact, it was not constructive in the sense that I ask my classmate to change ideas or prioritize them because I was not competent enough to do so.”

The third finding is related to teachers’ experiences of providing electronic feedback to their Egyptian student teachers of English. Lecturers stressed that it was a good experience but exhausting with students repeating the same mistakes. A sample example of this is given by Dr. Lobna who said:

“Despite being an enjoyable experience, E-feedback is very tiring especially with large classes such as the one I’m teaching. It is very frustrating when you give students feedback about a certain weakness in writing skills and they end up repeating the same mistakes again.”

They added that lecturers highlighted that it increased students’ accuracy in writing. Dr. Hala commented on this saying:

“I noticed that my students became more accurate in their essay writing than before. However, I started to draw their attention to the technicalities in writing such as grammar and punctuation to make their writing free from these mistakes”

Besides, lecturers were happy giving feedback on the technicalities of writing. However, teachers needed more time to provide robust and detailed feedback. Dr. Alaa capitalized on this saying:

“Teaching over 200 students in class and giving e-feedback to 80 made me feel that I need more time to give detailed feedback to my students that could help them improve their essay writing skills.”

Collaboratively, lecturers commented on increasing student participation through e-mails exchange.

Dr. Lamiaa said:

“My students were actively involved in this e-mails exchange and I knew this from the big number of e-mails I receive daily.”

Moreover, data revealed that both student teachers and their lecturers who used electronic feedback as a new pedagogic practice reported that it is generally effective in terms of the following points. First, it provided positive learning environment different from the physical rigid classroom environment. Second, it encouraged students' responsibility for their own written work. Third, it facilitated peer and teacher collaboration. Fourth, it increased student participation. Besides, it helped sharing learned outcomes between students, and finally, giving writing feedback to students electronically was a well-received and helpful pedagogic practice.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the questionnaire and interview demonstrates several threads of findings which promote the use of electronic feedback in writing. When online environments are used to give feedback, the type of feedback is called e-feedback. Recently, online environments have gained more attention as suitable for giving online-based feedback, or e-feedback (Opdenacker & Van Waes, 2004; Stassen, 2003; Tuzi, 2004). The findings of the current study reveal several advantages of using electronic feedback in assessing writing: First, e-feedback could reduce the role of the teacher in the learning process, and increase the amount of student participation. Second, e-feedback might help the students to be more honest in responding to the text, in other words, social desirable answers are less likely to occur. Third, e-feedback increased the amount of student participation, reduced the role of the teacher, and increased the amount of time students actually write. Fourth, receiving multiple e-feedback and detailed comments in electronic peer review encouraged students to re-shape their paper and revise more in terms of mechanics and technicalities of writing. This confirms the effectiveness of using of electronic feedback as a new pedagogical practise in assessing essay writing on the university level.

The findings of the current study revealed the need of teacher and students training on effective use of electronic feedback in writing to achieve the best writing quality. Also, most of advantages of peer feedback and e-feedback depend strongly on the quality of instruction and training the students get,

before engaging in peer and e-feedback activities (Tuzi, 2004). The students need to be instructed what to look for and how to look for it, when reviewing a document (Jacobs et al., 1998). Students who receive training will develop better quality responses, which contain more specific suggestions for improving a text (Tuzi, 2004). A difficulty with using feedback in general, according to Goldstein (2004), is that comments might be misunderstood or that students do not know how to revise a text after receiving feedback. Tuzi (2004) found that the use of e-feedback had a greater effect at the larger writing-level units. He concludes that e-feedback is an important stimulus for giving and receiving new ideas that can be included into subsequent drafts. However, some of the drawbacks of e-feedback are that students might not adequately know how to use the computer system and technical problems might occur.

Unlike what is stated in the literature (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Heift & Caws, 2000; Tuzi, 2001), the findings of the current study indicate that the quality of peer electronic comments provided by participants on students' writing papers was of low quality. Participants were able to provide more cognitive feedback comments for their peers. This might be attributed to the socio-cultural factors that are prevailing in the Egyptian society. Furthermore, detailed comments were a characteristic of both teacher and peer electronic feedback in Tuzi's (2001) study in which he concludes that e-feedback resulted in comprehensible comments that would influence the later drafts students write. In addition, the findings of the current study showed that the quantity of peer e-feedback comments has improved. According to Sullivan & Pratt (1996) more practice in writing through e-feedback affects the extent of comments students provide in their writing. Liu & Sadler (2003) found out that students in the computer-promoted group provided a generously proportioned number of comments on both the local and global levels compared to those in the traditional group. In addition, using computers in feedback sessions helps students produce focused responses. These specific responses influenced the changes in students' progress later in their writing drafts (Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). These findings emphasize the essential role of training the students in enhancing peer feedback quality. Students who were trained on

how to give effective feedback (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Tuzi, 2001) outperformed those who were not provided with any type of training.

Computer anxiety can be one of the factors that hinder the use of electronic feedback (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Matsumura & Hann, 2004; Tuzi, 2001). Upon deciding on the use of e-feedback, adequate training on the procedures and focus of good peer feedback should follow. Training can be seen as the "appropriate support" which Hyland (2003) emphasizes as necessary (p. 147). The teacher should be careful about students' abilities in distributing them to peer or group review. Besides, pairing students with different, but not entirely, abilities was found to result in better feedback (Heift & Caws, 2000; Liu & Sadler, 2003).

Feedback should be provided to the students in different ways, partly because students have different learning styles, but also because different types of feedback have different purposes and effects (Ferris, Pezone, Tade & Tinti, 1997). This means that peer feedback should not be seen as replacing all other forms of feedback, but rather as a complementary form to teacher feedback. With guidance instructions on what to look for and what to do, they can be useful readers of drafts (Jacobs et al., 1998). According to Tuzi (2004), different types of feedback should be included in the writing process, balancing feedback on a local level (sentence, paragraph, ideas/arguments) with a macro level (that is, audience, purpose, logic, content, organization, and development).

The mixture of methods accommodates most of students' learning preferences, which, in the long run, will have more positive influence on the quality of writing. Mixing of e-feedback with face-to-face learning styles has resulted in the best results in terms of quality of feedback and impact on revisions (Matsumura & Hann, 2004; Tuzi, 2001). In the implementation of effective e-feedback, the teacher should encourage students to comment on many of their colleagues' papers. Furthermore, this conclusion comes in support of Sullivan and Pratt's idea that feedback from more than one student tends to reinforce the same points and the same suggestions for revision (1996).

Students who are not accustomed to peer feedback are more likely to find the process of e-feedback hard and time consuming. They may also feel irritated as they are not sure what to give feedback on and the best way to give it (Macdonald, 2001). Students should be trained in how to give feedback on their peers' written essays in the form of e-mails. Using a detailed checklist may be valuable to inexperienced students, as it would focus their attention on the points that need more work in later drafts (Farag Allah, 2008). In order to save students' time, teachers can ask students to check only one piece of writing, chiefly at the beginning level. In addition to this, limiting the number of papers to be reviewed by each student will permit more careful reading and reflection which will help them develop better critical reading skills. Some students do not take the process of participate, review papers, or give any feedback to their peers seriously enough (Macdonald, 2001). This can be solved through several ways to overcome this problem such as assigning grades for feedback comments students give their peers (Macdonald, 2001). Moreover, Rollinson (2005) suggests promoting students' awareness that giving peer e-feedback may help students reflect on their own weaknesses and strengths. This reflection is guide students while redrafting their own papers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, e-feedback proved essential in the teaching and learning of essay writing for Egyptian student teachers of English. Student teachers revealed that it is instrumental in improving their essay writing skills. However, they considered peer e-feedback as somewhat useless and superficial. Besides, lecturers' experiences of e-feedback proved successful as they managed to respond to student teachers' e-mails but they found it somehow exhausting. It is highly recommended that e-feedback to be used in many courses and not only with language courses as it proved a potentially useful mode of giving feedback in the digital age.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX (1)

STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire has been designed to investigate the potential of e-feedback in improving Egyptian student teachers' essay writing skills. I kindly request you to answer this questionnaire fully. All the answers you provide will be confidential and for study purposes only. Thanks very much in advance for your help and collaboration.

The researchers

Dr. Soheir Seliem

Mr. Abdelhamid Ahmed

Students' Questionnaire

Please respond to the following statements by putting a tick (✓) into the box that best expresses your opinions about EFL essay writing.

(1) = Never; (2) = Rarely; (3) = Sometimes; (4) = Often; (5) = Always

No	Statements	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1	I sent my written essays via e-mail to my teacher regularly.					
2	I received my teacher's e-feedback within one or two days after sending it.					
3	I found my teacher's e-feedback useful in terms of improving my writing skills.					
4	My teacher's e-feedback helped me revise and edit my written essays better.					
5	My teacher's e-feedback helped me focus on the content of my writing.					
6	My teacher's e-feedback drew my attention to the grammatical mistakes.					
7	My teacher's e-feedback drew my attention to the lexical mistakes.					
8	My teacher's e-feedback helped me reshape my ideas.					
9	My teacher's e-feedback focused on the mechanics of writing.					
10	My teacher's e-feedback was constructive.					
11	My teacher's e-feedback was corrective.					
12	My classmate's e-feedback was helpful in improving my essay writing skills.					
13	My classmate's e-feedback was useless.					
14	My classmate's feedback was done on a surface level.					
15	My teacher's e-feedback is better than that of my classmate.					

APPENDIX (2)

STUDENTS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Q1. How do you perceive your teacher's e-feedback?

Q2. How do you perceive getting e-feedback from your classmate?

Q3. How different is peer e-feedback from teacher's e-feedback?

Q4. How has e-feedback helped you develop your writing skills?

Q5. What are the benefits of using e-feedback?

Q6. What are the pitfalls of using e-feedback?

APPENDIX (3)

TEACHERS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Q1. How do you view e-feedback as a pedagogic practice in the essay writing course?

Q2. Can you tell me about your experience in giving e-feedback?

Q3. How different is your e-feedback from students' peer e-feedback?

Q4. What aspects of Essay Writing were improved in students' writing with the course of time?

Q5. What are the drawbacks of e-feedback to your students?