

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords: Academic writing, writing feedback, EFL/ESL college learners, feedback-based writing conferences, sociocultural theory

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Introduction

Teaching writing to EFL learners is a demanding practice that requires adherence to thorough and focused processes, which are guided by constructive feedback to reach desired levels. If students do not receive regular and meaningful feedback, writing proficiency might be delayed. The present study investigates teacher-student feedback conferences, in both individual and collaborative settings with colleagues in small groups, from students' perspectives. Writing conferences involve discussions, negotiations, explanations and suggestions for improving writing in a sociable environment. Students' perceptions are elicited quantitatively through their responses to an online survey about the effectiveness of teacher feedback as well as semi-structured interviews are conducted to strengthen the quantitative data.

The sociocultural theory (SCT) of teaching L2 writing provides the framework for this study. Language teachers have recently been adopting the SCT perspective for teaching writing, which has positive influences on students' writing abilities. Therefore, the present study explores the perceptions of female students of the European Languages Faculty through the SCT of teaching writing. This theory views teaching EFL writing as a social, cultural and educational practice and emphasizes the importance of incorporating all surrounding factors into the teaching process, including students' backgrounds, beliefs and interactions, to eventually achieve progress in L2 writing. This study will also seek to suggest vital instructional techniques for effectively providing writing feedback to students to improve their English writing proficiency. The literature review explores previous studies that have investigated the implementation of EFL/ESL writing feedback conferences, as well as the effectiveness of its application on learners' writing achievements. An explanation of the methodology for the study includes details about the participants, methods and procedures. Finally, major trends are interpreted and connected to previous studies in the discussion

chapter, then, limitations and implications to EFL teaching are highlighted to provide more insights into EFL academic writing.

1.1. Definitions of Key Terms

1.1.1. Academic Writing at the EFL University-Level

Learning academic writing for EFL learners might be one of the most challenging, yet core tasks to guarantee success in both future studies and career. Being a competent academic writer requires learners to attend extensive courses that offer explicit instructions on writing techniques and mechanics beside receiving effective feedback so that they can learn from their errors and improve. EFL learners enrolled in academic writing programs are offered with the essential principals and skills of writing academically, and accepted texts to use throughout their college studies and further professional purposes. Academic writing courses involve training students to produce more formal texts for various purposes and genres such as descriptive, narrative, and expository texts. One of the underlying objectives of training learners on these types of texts is to develop their English language proficiency through the production of various text types, yet following the academic principals of writing. Moreover, academic writing has the benefit of developing a variety of skills and knowledge. For instance, when courses are effectively designed, academic writing can improve learners' knowledge on subject matters, their critical, creative and innovative thinking, as well as their abilities in English language components. These benefits can be achieved when students are effectively trained and instructed on the different processes of producing academic texts such as, planning, drafting, composing, and evaluating.

Competence in EFL literacy is one of the key requirements for enrolment in English studies. Most English departments in Saudi universities require students to achieve high scores on the admission test administered to new registrants at the beginning of every

academic semester. These tests ensure candidates have adequate background and experience in English and that candidates will be able to study English courses in the department. To further improve students' English proficiency, the newly registered students take two-level compulsory courses in language skills, reading, writing, listening, and speaking during their first year as English majors. These extensive courses aim to develop English students' language and literacy skills in the English academic community. The present investigation focuses on writing courses by exploring and evaluating the perceptions and expectations of students on the efficacy of Feedback-Based Writing Conferences (FBWC) as an effective, yet uncommon, approach in the Saudi context.

Some EFL learners who study in a large, unstructured programme may receive limited and insufficient instruction. Such lacking instruction may in turn result in students with poor academic proficiency and low academic achievement (Naghdipour, 2016; Troia, Harbaugh, Shankland, Wolbers, & Lawrence, 2013; Cumming, 2001). Therefore, it is important for teachers and stake holders to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the practices and instructional approaches used by instructors in foundational courses. In addition, when planning an academic writing curriculum, it is important to consider the approach used for evaluating students' essays and to develop compatible writing evaluations and support. Planning should consider the instructional approaches utilised by the teacher, the process and the product, and the feedback methods employed to respond to students' writing. Writing teachers can employ a variety of feedback conferencing methods: written and oral, peer- or self-feedback, and face-to-face or online feedback. The selection of the feedback method is dependent on the course objectives, students' ages, and students' levels of English proficiency (Regalla, Davies, Grissom, & Losavio, 2018; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The current research focuses on writing feedback in the form of teacher-student conferences that

can be administered individually or collaboratively with small groups in the university context.

1.1.2. Feedback-based Writing Conferences

Conferencing in the present context of the study refers to a type of face-to-face oral feedback offered by writing teachers to EFL students. In feedback-based conferences, the teacher arranges regular sessions with the students to respond to their writing in a more dialogic and collaborative atmosphere. These conferences involve critical review of students' previously produced texts, constructive feedback, and suggestions on how to improve different aspects of their writing. Conferencing with students individually or in small groups involves evaluating the writing process, discussing and exchanging ideas, and most importantly, cultivating friendly relationships between teachers (evaluators) and other students (peers). Feedback-based conferences can make learning experiences more personalised and hence, more effective (Nicholas & Paatsch, 2014; Young & Miller, 2004). The conferencing method can be an effective tool for identifying students' writing struggles that might not be detected in the classroom especially with large numbers of students. Throughout the teacher-student conference, discussions between the participants and the mediator (teacher) can assist in determining each student's writing problems, thus providing necessary support and scaffolded feedback.

Moreover, in addition to increasing students' immersion in the EFL context, receiving feedback orally on academic writing for EFL learners can build a successful learning environment and a positive relationship between the teacher and the students. When effectively designed, feedback-based conferences can be administered either individually or in small groups depending on the conference goals set by both the teacher and the student. To fully consider a variety of students' different needs, teachers should offer opportunities for feedback conferences in the appropriate settings for learners. Collaborative and individual

conferences based on students' needs and preferences will result in effective feedback meetings where learners freely and actively play critical and active roles in the process. Fostering collaboration among students and their writing teachers while addressing writing issues they encounter will significantly improve learners' social skills, autonomy, and critical thinking (Bayraktar, 2012). Given that this feedback method is not traditional and that students are at the university level, student-focused instruction should be employed. The students should not be restricted to limited opportunities in shaping their learning experiences. Instead, EFL university-students should participate in a range of decision-making processes and elaborations, as their voices and reflections should shape their learning experience (Morton, Storch, & Thompson, 2015; Shehadeh, 2011).

1.2. Significance and Aims of the Study

The educational system in Saudi Arabia faces powerful changes in various dimensions, such as instructional methods, learning materials and policies. The vast modernisation endeavours in Saudi education are aligned with the 2030 Vision, proposed by the Saudi government with the aim to transform the country into a globalised, productive, and innovative nation. One of the main educational goals of the 2030 Vision centres on learners' development and student-led approaches to teaching. Considering students' needs, interests and preferences regarding writing feedback and aligning instructional approaches with students' requirements and anticipated outcomes can maximise their achievements and motivation. The rationale behind eliciting students' views, experiences and preferences regarding one-on-one and group FBWCs stems from the importance of fostering effective collaboration between students and their teachers using the learners' preferred approaches of critical and constructive discussions. Identifying students' opinions on and their linguistic and personal needs for FBWCs is a key factor, according to SCT that will directly influence teachers' instructional practices in writing courses. Gathering these opinions will certainly help writing teachers to provide the most

suitable types of feedback, with the students' needs in mind. Thus, this study aims to offer insight on individual and collaborative FBWCs and its influence on L2 writing in the light of the SCT.

Some research studies have explored the topic of using FBWCs to teach EFL writing from a variety of angles, through the consideration of teachers' perceptions, using virtual employments of these conferences, and through observation of the teachers' and students' interactions during conferences (Saeed, Ghazali, Sahuri, & Abdulrab, 2018; Eckstein, 2013; Ewert, 2009). However, the need remains to evaluate and analyse learners' thoughts on this topic through a contextual perspective, which this study aims to investigate.

1.3. Research Questions

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

1. What are the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of individual and group feedback-based writing conferences?
- 2) Which type of environment—individual or group—do students tend to prefer for receiving feedback?
- 3) From the students' perspectives, how can feedback-based writing conferences best be implemented to improve the learners' academic writing levels?

Literature Review

The literature review highlights relevant research studies that focus on the topic of academic writing in EFL contexts. The following sections review previous works on the commonly employed instructional methods for teaching writing beside discussing related research on the methods of responding to EFL students' writing. Gap in the literature was identified and discussed in the last section as a result of analysing related studies on the topic of FBWCs.

2.1. Writing Feedback Methods

Feedback can observably influence the development of EFL learners. The concept of scaffolded feedback was first suggested by Vygotsky's SCT and it stresses the importance of teachers providing assistance through scaffolding (Rassaei, 2014; Barnard & Campbell, 2005). Writing feedback can be offered using different methods based on students' preferences and curriculum requirements. Teacher feedback, whether oral or written and conducted either individually or collaboratively, is the primary type of writing feedback involving scaffolding, evaluation, and discussions with the learners. Writing teachers usually focus on applying effective and extensive feedback methods as facilitative educational tools to enhance writing abilities. Selecting the most suitable methods of feedback can significantly increase learners' motivation to succeed and improve their comprehension of writing genres and techniques. For this reason, teachers should consider learners' opinions and preferences when designing instructional feedback. Several studies have examined the topic of teacher feedback and its various methods of employment in different contexts, along with its effectiveness in English writing performance (Bijami, Pandian, & Singh, 2016; Panahi, Birjandi, & Azabdaftari, 2013; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

The major two types of teacher-writing feedback explored in EFL institutional contexts are written and oral methods. The differences and effects of oral versus written feedback on

EFL students has been widely studied because of its extensive use in large EFL contexts (Bijami et al., 2016; Sobhani & Tayebipour, 2015; Marzban & Sarjami, 2014; Erlam, Ellis, & Batstone, 2013). Most previous studies have found the efficacy of teacher oral feedback to be greater than written feedback. EFL students usually receive oral feedback through more collaborative and interactional dialogues with the teacher, which simplifies the process of communication and comprehension of different writing errors to students (Marzban & Sarjami, 2014). In contrast, written feedback focuses mainly on the form and accuracy of the written text without considering related factors such as learning styles and language proficiency that directly influence students' writing and can only be observed through interactional oral feedback (Sobhani & Tayebipour, 2015; Marzban & Sarjami, 2014).

Most studies that have investigated the popular method of written feedback have included a defined rubric used by the studied institution; this rubric guides the writing teacher in developing the evaluation of EFL students. However, the teacher-written feedback method is commonly associated with problems such as incomprehensible teacher comments and students' ignoring the written feedback and focusing on the grade rather than the feedback (Sobhani & Tayebipour, 2015). This leads to inadequate progress in academic writing as there is no 'interchange between the teacher and the student' (Sobhani & Tayebipour, 2015). Nevertheless, written feedback can be effective when the teacher offers holistic meaningful feedback that focuses on both the meaning and the form of students' texts. For example, providing comments on the contents and meaning expressed by students in their writing in addition to feedback on grammatical and structural aspects (Macallister, 2006). Finally, researchers conclude that teacher-written feedback is better employed with another interactional method of feedback to guarantee better outcomes. Using written feedback exclusively can be an influential provision in large institutions where the implementation of other creative methods is not feasible (Marzban & Sarjami, 2014).

Hyland (2003) describes oral feedback on writing as “influential when students are actively involved, asking questions, clarifying meaning, and discussing instead of simply accepting [written] advice” (cited in Sobhani & Tayebipour, 2015, p. 1602). As previously stated, further complementing dialogic feedback with structured written feedback to establish complete construction of academic writing development is recommended (Jordan, 2004).

Peer feedback on EFL writing has become a commonplace practice and has been investigated in several EFL contexts (Ruegg, 2018; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Widiati, 2002). Peer feedback is viewed in prior research as “a form of an immediate, socially appropriate audience providing more compelling impetus for the student to revise” (Zhang, 1995). Some EFL students prefer peer feedback over the rigid judgment received from the writing teacher as peer feedback is considered to provide more socially supportive responses and to be a more interactive and flexible approach to EFL writing feedback. Lundstrom and Baker (2009) compared the effects of receiving and giving feedback to peers on writing development. The study revealed that students who give their peers feedback achieve faster progress in writing than students who only received feedback without critically evaluating others' texts. Allowing students to critique and analyse peers' texts can improve the evaluator's writing ability and avoid the errors encountered in others' writing. However, it is important for writing teachers to train EFL students in successful peer review processes. Following 'collaborative' stances when responding and evaluating peers' texts is more effective for constructive feedback than the 'prescriptive' stance which focuses on form feedback (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992). Similarly, Yu and Hu's (2017) study highlights the importance of training EFL reviewers to pay less attention to form and surface-level errors in peers' texts. In contrast, the study suggests more emphasis should be on effective peer feedback that involves comments on content, vocabulary use, fluency, and meaningful idea generation.

EFL students' attitudes and performance when using peer feedback have been examined and compared to teacher-based feedback in various contexts (Amerian, Ahmadian, & Mehri, 2014; Shooshtari & Mir, 2014; Yang, Badger, & Yu, 2006; Zhang, 1995; Paulus, 1999). A comparative study conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of peer versus teacher feedback on writing outcomes analysed students' textual products obtained from two experimental groups, one guided by teacher feedback and one by peer feedback (Yang et al., 2006). The study indicates a positive impact of peer review on students' autonomy and self-regulation. However, more improvement in EFL writing was achieved by the group led by teacher feedback. Teacher's support and feedback for EFL students positively influence university students and generally improves their writing ability in addition to their comprehension of academic writing mechanics (Amerian et al., 2014). On the other hand, peer feedback remained a minor influence on students' development as the teacher-guided feedback group outperformed the experimental group using peer evaluation. It is suggested to employ a balanced approach of feedback that incorporates the benefits of teacher, peer, and students' own feedback for EFL writing evaluation. Students need to prepare direct and focused goals for feedback and develop critical and holistic evaluations when offering their peers or themselves feedback (Amerian et al., 2014). Likewise, teachers should clearly utilise appropriate methods of feedback that feature responsive explanations and elaborations to successfully and critically direct students' progress.

Several papers study the effectiveness of teacher and peer feedback and students' perceptions of different modes and protocols for the administration and delivery of writing feedback (Delante, 2017; Laflen & Smith, 2017; Pritchard & Morrow, 2017; Cox, Black, Heney, & Keith, 2015; Moloudi, 1999). Writing feedback can be administered online using platforms such as web 2.0 tools which can influence EFL writing whether through synchronous or asynchronous feedback from the teacher and/or peers. Some prior studies

compare online and face-to-face teacher-student feedback and their usefulness for both EFL writing teachers and students (Ene & Upton, 2018; Cheng, 2017; Cox et al., 2015). Other researchers examine different modes of feedback through the integration of peer feedback (Saeed, Ghazali, Sahuri, & Abdulrab, 2018; Guardado & Shi, 2007; Hine, 2017; Pritchard & Morrow, 2017; Yang, 2016; Kim, 2011; Rosalia & Llosa, 2008). EFL participants find interactional online writing feedback more beneficial for the development of academic writing and social communication skills (Saeed et al., 2018; Vorobel & Kim, 2017). However, studies conducted to compare online and traditional face-to-face writing feedback reveal students' high preferences for immediate and direct face-to-face feedback (Kemp & Grieve, 2014; Strobl, 2014). Further, some EFL students find no major difference between the two modes, online or direct, yet express their desire to receive instructive and guided feedback rather than constructive and indirect evaluation (Strobl, 2014).

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

Being academically competent in foundational writing stages helps ensure successful futures for students, especially EFL students, as the issue of language proficiency might interfere with the process of writing development. One way to enhance learning outcomes in EFL college context is through the accurate predetermination of students' needs, struggles, and preferred learning styles. In the current context, feedback is a key element through which most learners progress and achievements depend on the selection of feedback methods, which should be carefully chosen. The type of feedback used when teaching writing is also a way for teachers to encourage students and enhances their writing development (Nicholas & Paatsch, 2014). It is found that students who regularly received timely and constructive feedback from their teachers achieved more academic growth than others receiving less informative and inconsistent feedback (Yang, Hu, & Zhang, 2014).

Therefore, FBWCs represent a significant form of feedback that contributes to academic writing development (Atai & Alipour, 2012; Anast-May, Penick, Schroyer, & Howell, 2011; Consalvo, 2011; Ewert, 2009; DeMott, 2006). According to Bayraktar (2012), conferencing is defined as “response sessions, assisted performance, face-to-face interaction”; one-to-one or group teaching; or “conversation about students’ papers and meaningful contact” (p. 709). Conferencing can be valuable and advantageous when learners reflect on their own learning process and written texts can be critiqued by teachers (Nosratinia & Nikpanjeh, 2015). Another key factor behind the effectiveness of FBWCs is the possibility to incorporate other forms of feedback such as peer and self-feedback in addition to teachers’ written and oral feedback, which can be provided individually or collaboratively. Complementing the basic form of teacher-student feedback conferencing with the inclusion of peer evaluation in a more collaborative environment has been examined in several contexts (Nosratinia & Nikpanjeh, 2015; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Nicholas and Paatsch (2014) describe teacher-student conferencing as an efficient avenue for participants, teachers, and students that allows teachers to monitor feedback receivers, the students, and their understanding of identified errors and to provide them with further assistance when affective factors negatively influence students' writing. During conferencing, feedback receivers are also able to analyse their texts and both teacher and peer feedback more effectively. This is because they are offered the opportunity to grasp information, modify, and reformulate other parties' evaluations immediately (Nicholas & Paatsch, 2014; Yang et al., 2014). Eckstein (2013) considers writing conferences a beneficial method for teachers and students in which teachers can comprehend the intended meaning articulated in students' texts. Similarly, students can be instructed on how to revise their texts and gain insights on the readers' reactions to their writing while receiving the feedback.

Some previous studies attempted to observe the roles of teachers and students during conferencing and analyse their impact on students' development of EFL writing and other essential skills (Yeh, 2016; Nosratinia & Nikpanjeh, 2015; Nicholas & Paatsch, 2014; Abdulkhaleq, Hoon, & Abdullah, 2013; Ewert, 2009). Results show that teachers in conferences can raise EFL students' awareness of audience or readers and act as informants of rhetorical and linguistic aspects to students who might lack significant native, academic knowledge of the language (Eckstein, 2013). Moreover, Abdulkhaleq et al. (2013) observed writing teachers and students during conferencing and found that the teacher dominates most of the conversations and that the lack of student involvement in the discussions is due to several factors. Generally, EFL students tend to prefer to play the role of silent receivers because of their low English competence and their high levels of anxiety when meeting with the teacher. As noted by Abdulkhaleq et al. (2013), when EFL students pass their turns in discussion to their teacher or peers, they are observed to experience high levels of anxiety which hinders them from being fluent participants. Several studies disagreed on whether the teacher should dominate conferences and discussions in addition to determining the ultimate outcomes (Yeh, 2016; Liu, 2009). For example, Yeh (2016) surveyed EFL learners and found that most participants expressed their preference for teacher-directed oral feedback to either peer-correction or self-correction. However, some studies reveal that feedback conferencing can be inefficient if teachers excessively dominate the discussion and offer few opportunities for student dialogues and interaction (Abdulkhaleq et al., 2013).

As previously discussed, teacher-student conferences have been shown to be an effective tool for responding to students' writing. Weissberg (2006) asserts that conferencing can be an "unparalleled opportunity to provide targeted individualized instruction" (cited in Ewert's, 2009, p. 251). One of the major findings explained by Ewert (2009) is that participants' attitudes and behaviours in conferences can be facilitative and supportive to EFL

students. For this reason, adding collaborative constructs to conferencing can increase positive relationships among participants which can lead to better receptiveness of teachers' comments and to the evaluation. Jianling (2018) also advocates for the need to adopt an explicitly collaborative approach among writing teachers and students in lieu of the dominant approach of solitary writing.

According to Reither (1989), "thinking of writing as a collaborative process presents more precise ways to consider what students do when they write, not just with their texts, but also with their language, their personae, and their readers" (cited in Nosratinia & Nikpanjeh, 2015, p. 2218). Collaborative FBWC helps students adopt this way of thinking. Oral conferencing conducted individually or collaboratively helps build a collaborative atmosphere where participants actively engage in the meaning construction process for better-written products (Ewert, 2009). Several social skills are fostered in collaborative conferencing sessions that increase participants' sense of cooperation, community, and accountability (Nosratinia & Nikpanjeh, 2015). However, some students may not prefer group feedback methods, and personalised feedback conferencing is shown to be more appealing in an EFL college context (Yeh, 2016). To conclude, it is important for writing teachers to respond to their students' writing in the way most preferred by students themselves. These preferences can be determined through needs analysis or through observing students' reactions to both modes (Yeh, 2016).

Many studies suggest the importance of the writing teachers as discussion leaders to encourage students to explain, negotiate meanings on their writing, and exchange ideas with their peers to achieve successful writing outcomes (Abiddin & West, 2007). However, Mahfoodh's (2017) study attributes excess teacher authority and students' excessive respect to cultural and social underpinnings which can directly influence their contributions in conferences and thus, their writing development. For example, students are supposed to get

more clarification and explanation of the teacher's written feedback. When students avoid meeting their teacher because of fear or cultural background, their writing progress can be hindered. This might result in students playing passive roles while conferencing and inactively accepting peers' and teachers' comments (Mahfoodh, 2017; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990).

Nicholas and Paatsch (2014) differentiate between monologic and dialogic discourses. In monologic discourses information is only transmitted whereas dialogic discourses can be used as devices for critical thinking. Therefore, when students are not offered the opportunity to collaboratively interpret and meaningfully process information they receive from the feedback, the dialogue is monologic (Nicholas & Paatsch, 2014). Chomsky and Rogoff proposed that "understanding happens between people; it cannot be attributed to one person or the other in communication" (cited in Nicholas & Paatsch, 2014, p. 137). Reaching a mutual comprehension is like a window where thoughts, messages, and received feedback are successfully processed by participants (Nicholas & Paatsch, 2014). Further, students offered writing feedback through conferencing can gain more confidence, become more aware of readers and audience, and develop their academic identity (Mochizuki, 2018).

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

attitudes towards conferencing and found that the teacher's behaviour during the conference was important (Abdulkhaleq et al., 2013; Chen, 2005; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990).

Abdulkhaleq et al. (2013) recommend an ice breaking technique for increasing motivation and interaction among conference participants. This technique involves talking about social issues to begin the conferencing with a sense of rapport. Hence, the session can be initiated in a more friendly atmosphere as the students are at ease (Abdulkhaleq et al., 2013). Chen's (2005) study explores the interactional influences of conferencing on writing through interviewing students and teachers. The researcher found that most students express positive expectations and opinions about the usefulness of feedback conferencing, however, some learners face issues of anxiety and prefer not to have immediate face-to-face feedback. Students attribute their nervousness to the situation in which they have to keep asking questions and interact with the teacher in English (Chen, 2005). Another proposed way to reduce such anxiety is through raising students' awareness of the purpose and goals of the feedback session and the discourses among participants (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990). The study also claims that students need to be informed that the types of conversation and relationship between the teacher and students in classroom are different in conferencing, so they can be less nervous and productive (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990).

Additionally, teachers' attitudes during feedback sessions with EFL students can influence the atmosphere of the conference and directly impact students' performance in writing. Results show that strong understanding and a good relationship between the teacher and students can benefit students' written production while the lack of rapport and friendliness among participants leads to low achievement (Mochizuki, 2018; Abdulkhaleq et al., 2013). Mochizuki states that the teacher-student relationship is vital in the conferencing method of feedback as it constitutes the main mediation for writing feedback and learning. Moreover, Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997) distinguish between the characteristics of weak

and strong students during conferencing. The researchers found that more confident and stronger students appeared to produce more successful revisions because teachers were less directive with them since they were more assertive during the conferences. In contrast, less confident and conservative students simply follow their teacher's feedback and revised their texts accordingly with less creativity and judgement (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997).

2.2. Perceptions on FBWCs

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

2.3. Theoretical Framework

SCT emphasises the importance of teacher feedback in improving proficiency in EFL skills, which, in this case, is academic writing. Effective teaching approaches should have reliable theoretical foundations to support and guide instructional practices. Several theories related to ELT that can be found in the literature can be adopted by teachers to deliver more structured and theoretically based lessons. Adopting Vygotsky's SCT of English teaching

entails delivering lessons through social and interactional activities involving both students and teachers. In SCT, collaborations and interactions are linked with higher mental processes (VanPatten & Williams, 2014). SCT has three key constructs: mediation, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and internalisation.

Vygotsky's SCT links human cognitive processes with social and cultural activities (VanPatten & Williams, 2014). Interaction, a key factor in this theory, is significantly associated with higher mental processes. Mediation can fall into three categories: mediators, such as private speech; artefacts (including language and technology); and feedback and scaffolding offered by more qualified people. The topic of teacher dominance and scaffolding is referred to as "the most frequently used theoretical construct for examining writing conferences" (DeMott, 2006). In L2 teaching studies and related research, feedback from teachers is considered the major type of human mediation available in the social and educational environments to offer guidance and assistance in distinct ways. Feedback and scaffolding consist of social practices delivered by the EFL/ESL teacher or mediator to the students, who are less qualified and receive these actions.

Another fundamental construct under the SCT is the ZPD, which is defined as the distance between the learner's actual level of knowledge and the potential level that he/she could reach. ZPD is a model of a developmental process that can be predicted through dynamic assessment used throughout the process of teaching. It is crucial to offer students explicit instructions before offering them feedback and to identify their levels before and after achievement development. Under the guidance of a teacher or more capable students, students' language skills will improve. As scaffolding within the ZPD prompts learners to move from the other-regulated stage to the self-regulated stage (Vygotsky, 1978), peer scaffolding is explained as providing the appropriate level of assistance to the feedback receiver to enhance their current level of knowledge (Jianling, 2018). Facilitating the learning process in social and

meaningful settings that emphasise dynamic evaluation makes learners more likely to progress because they are motivated and involved in the process of meaning construction. When learners participate collaboratively, either in small groups or in one-on-one settings with the teacher, they will successfully internalise negotiated knowledge on L2 skills.

2.4. Gap and Context of the Study

While the above studies have contributed information on the effectiveness of teachers' feedback for EFL writing and provided some models for examining EFL student performances, more investigations are needed to thoroughly understand students' needs, experiences, and perception of effective FBWCs. Some L2 students do not feel confident with their writing and might be intimidated by facing the teacher directly with their writing, therefore, understanding their needs and expectations of the conference can better help designing suitable learning environment. It is essential to further investigate students' perceptions of the writing feedback offered during teacher-student conferences in order to improve EFL learning processes for both teachers and learners.

To address gaps in the literature, the current research explores the perceptions of English major students during their first-year in the English department on the efficiency of writing feedback delivered to them in conferences with their teachers, by illuminating the learners' suggestions and experiences. The literature on FBWCs lacks research on the present topic, especially in the Saudi context, and only minor investigations have been conducted to gather English learners' opinions and experiences with the process. By analysing the current writing method of feedback, this study aims to provide new insights into elevating students' writing skills through effective conferencing within a Saudi context. Working with the process approach of teaching writing, factors for improving students' English writing skills will be identified to help them achieve future academic success.

Research Methodology

3.1. Mixed Methods Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design has been employed to accomplish the study's goals. Using two distinct methods in the present study allowed multiple results to emerge for interpretation and enabled the development of several inclusive and practical plans and suggestions for the effective future implementation of FBWCs for EFL writing. Following this design, the main results from both collection methods are combined and interpreted sequentially, starting with the collection and initial analysis of quantitative data followed by qualitative data collection and interpretation. Subsequently, results from both methods are connected and shaped the final conclusion.

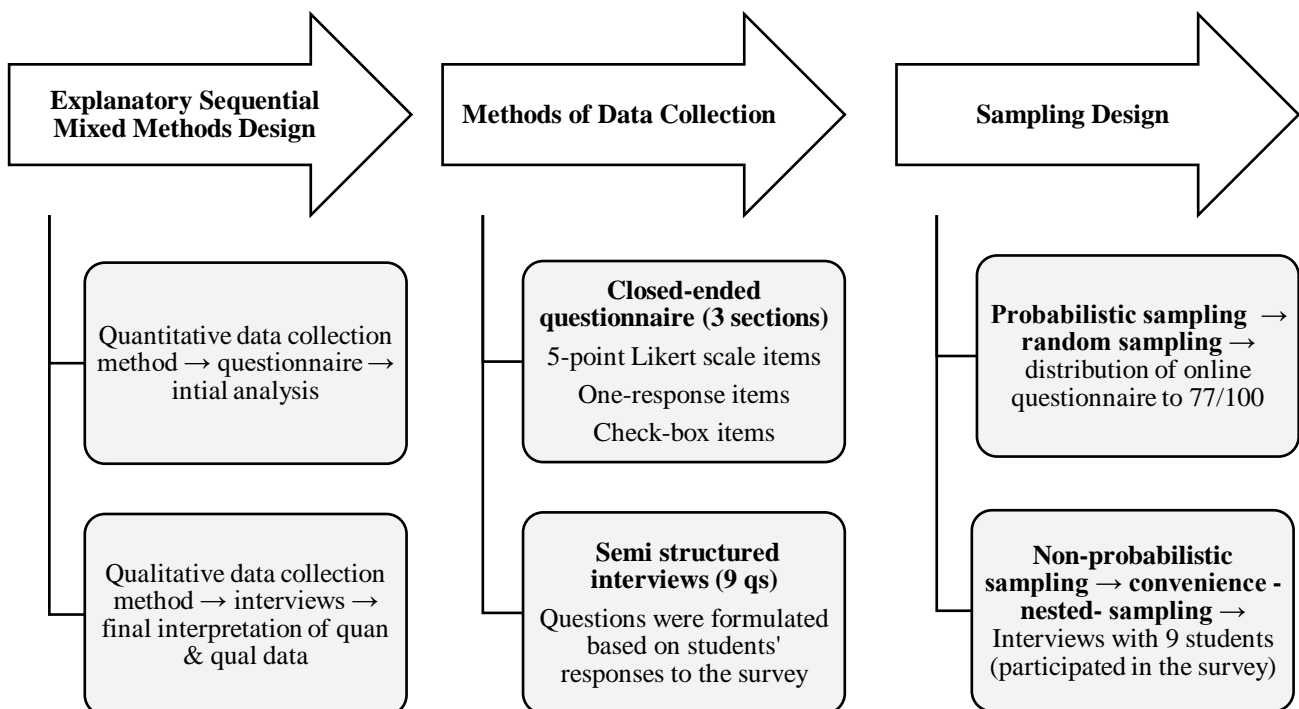


Figure 2. An Overview of the Utilized Mixed Methods Design along with Data Collection and Sampling Procedures

3.2. Research Paradigm

Researchers in human and scientific studies tend to follow perspectives that allow them to investigate issues properly as the issues relate to the researchers' worldviews; the problems are examined in ways that stay consistent with the researchers' beliefs and the beliefs of their academic community. In other words, selected paradigms or worldviews consist of beliefs about the realities and philosophical underpinnings of the world that are compatible with each researcher's own belief system and those of the scientific field to which the researcher belongs (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The philosophical framework behind the present mixed-methods study is the pragmatic paradigm. Unlike positivists and interpretivists, pragmatists use diverse approaches to derive knowledge and support the multiple realities of social phenomena.

Pragmatists believe that quantitative and qualitative data can coexist in a study based on both theoretical 'explanatory' and 'comprehensive' positions (Lozano, Fachelli, & López-Roldán, 2019). While the qualitative approach emphasizes the importance of constructing reality and knowledge socially through natural interactions between people and researchers, the quantitative approach stresses the value of measurements and numerical facts in analysing relationships between variables (Taylor, 2013). To provide richer results, the mixed-methods combined in pragmatic research are not built on certain epistemological views, making the research more unbiased because it incorporates methods from each paradigm (Lozano et al., 2019). Building a well-designed study should be oriented on the articulation of a certain worldview approach and on selecting suitable methods for data collection (Lozano et al., 2019). In the present study, the employment of a closed ended questionnaire allows for initial understanding and identification of students' attitudes towards FBWCs which leads to generalization of results (Creswell, 2014). Analysing the qualitative data obtained from the

interviews helped in generating implicit and unpredictable results behind students' responses to the survey and provided suggestions on how to improve the quality of FBWCs.

3.3. Participants and Sampling

Mixed-methods research aims address the research questions by generating meaningful data from participants selected as representatives of a population. To select participants, two main techniques of sampling are usually used in mixed-methods studies: probability and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling, or random sampling, focuses on the breadth of quantitative information and aims to generate large numbers of responses to establish generalizable results from a representative sample (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). Non-probability sampling, in contrast, selects participants at their convenience to be contributors to more meaningful, deep, and narrative information about the research problem. Following the sequential mixed-methods approach, this research employed probability sampling for conducting the questionnaire followed by non-probability sampling for the qualitative technique (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

3.3.1. Selection of the Questionnaire Participants

This study used a closed-ended questionnaire directed to participants selected based on the simple random sampling technique. Simple random sampling is used to achieve high external validity that can allow generalization of results. As probability sampling requires a sampling frame, or a list of the whole population, the English language departments on the Al-Sulaymaniyah campus provided me with first-year students' data to use for randomly distributing the questionnaire.

3.3.2. Selection of the Interview Participants

Students who participated in the interviews were selected based on convenience sampling which is commonly associated with qualitative methods. Another technique used to select

participants for the qualitative method is based on a nested sampling design which is used in mixed-methods designs, specifically with quantitative sampling. Nested sampling includes extracting a small number of participants for the qualitative method from the quantitative sample. Therefore, in nested sampling, the qualitative sample is a sub-sample of the quantitative sample. From this sub-sample additional data can be gathered to develop a further understanding of the information obtained from the quantitative tool (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, n.d.; Riazi & Candlin, 2014). Convenience sampling was used because students who are extracted from the quantitative sample voluntarily participated in the interviews at their convenience.

Participants were selected based on systematic random sampling. The total intended sample was 110 female KAU students. However, only 77 students responded to the questionnaire and 9 students were chosen for the semi-structured interviews. The sample consists of 77 novice students majoring in English Language at King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Out of those participants, four (5.2%) had a low (1.5 or less) graduate point average (GPA), 27 (35%) had a middle (2.00 – 3.00) GPA, and 46 (60%) had a high (4.00 – 5.00) GPA. The mean of the participants' age was 23 years with a standard deviation (SD) of six, and a median of 21. Figure 3 shows the frequency of each GPA category represented in the bar plot below (low GPA category, middle GPA category, and high GPA category). The students are registered in writing courses, which are compulsory courses, in the first and second semester of their English major. The participants are all Saudi, so they share similar background knowledge of academic English and study skills as they are *undergraduates in the English department*. The participants have been studying English for six years or more. Having participants who are experienced in English language learning strengthens the study and provides more reliable results. These characteristics ensure the students have valid and adequate experience of learning English.

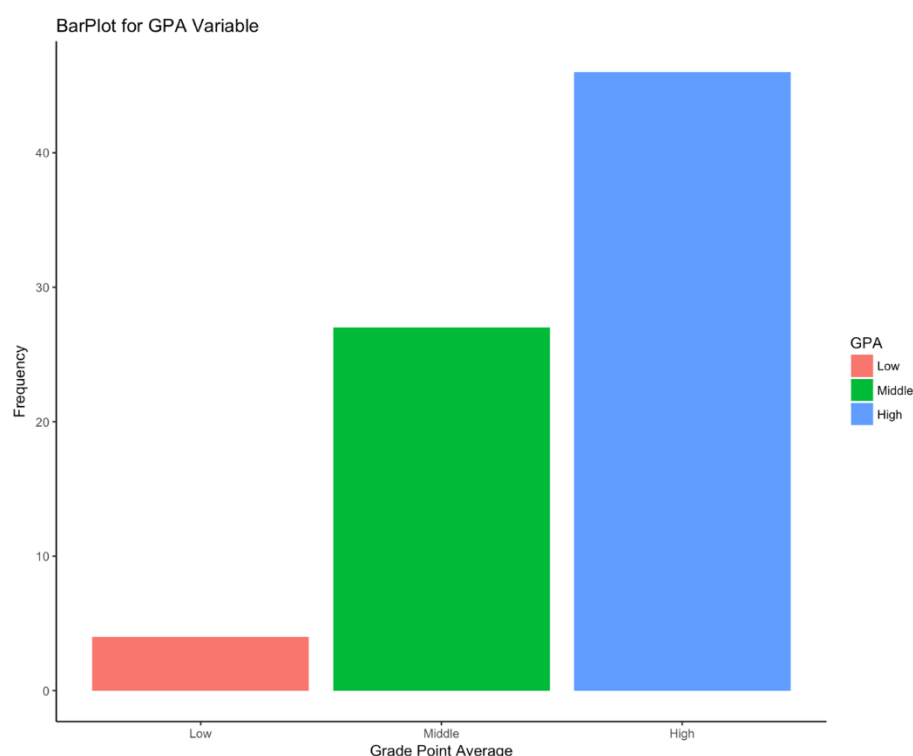


Figure 3. Frequency of each GPA Category

3.4. Data Collection Instruments

3.4.1. Questionnaire

This study is conducted to measure the effectiveness of academic writing feedback offered through student meetings with instructors, whether individually or in small groups and data was collected about student perceptions towards FBWCs. An online survey was distributed to collect data to measure the perception of female Saudi-English students of the relative value of writing feedback through conferencing. To better explore and understand students' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences with FBWCs, a closed-ended questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data (Appendix C). The quantitative tool, the questionnaire, is designed to be appropriate for the students' level of English proficiency. To achieve this, a closed-ended questionnaire was developed in which students are not required to write open responses. The survey consisted of 27 items: two demographic items (age and GPA) and 25 items to measure the effectiveness of FBWCs. There are 14 items (seven 5-

point Likert scale continuous items, and seven check-box items) to measure General Views, three 5-point Likert scale items to measure Individual Feedback, and eight items to measure Group Feedback (six 5-point Likert scale items and two check-box items). All 5-Point Likert scale items were coded as follows: Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, and Strongly Agree = 5.

The division of the questionnaire questions is compatible with and based on the three research questions. The first section is about students' general perceptions of FBWCs and partially answers the first research question, as more open answers are needed through interviews data. The second and third sections which are entitled individual and group conferencing sections provided answers for the second research question. The last research question about students' suggestions and needs regarding more effective feedback on academic writing through conferencing is mostly answered through the interviews. The questionnaire was distributed to first-year English major students through two writing instructors who encouraged their students to participate, also, through sending it to first-year students group on WhatsApp and via their email. The survey took approximately 10 days in the middle of 2019 February to be completed.

3.4.2. Validity and Reliability

Pilot testing of the survey was carried out before actual distribution. The pilot testing involved expert judgment and an internal consistency test to increase validity and reliability of the survey. Pilot testing conducted before the actual data collection to increase content validity and the effectiveness of the items and to minimize reliability errors (Mackey & Gass, 2005). To increase the validity of the questionnaire, five assistant professors in Applied Linguistics reviewed the questionnaire for clarity and suitability against the developed research questions and aims. This process is referred to as a face validity test. The reviewers'

suggestions and comments were considered, and the questions were edited accordingly. Namely, the experts' feedback highlighted some repetition of ideas in different questions; thus, some modifications were made to the questionnaire to make it more reliable. The initial design of the questionnaire involved 32 questions, but after the face validity process and editing, 27 questions remained. Subsequently, 40 students from the target population were randomly selected for pilot testing to check the readability and the extent of students' understanding of the questions. This test indicated that the questionnaire appeared to be lucid and comprehensible to them. To ensure that the questionnaire was reliable, the Cronbach's alpha of the items was calculated as a reliability estimate. Using the Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate, the alpha for this scale (sixteen 5-point Likert scale continuous items) is 0.67. This indicates acceptable reliability. Figure 4. summaries the procedures of ensuring both validity and reliability of the questionnaire.

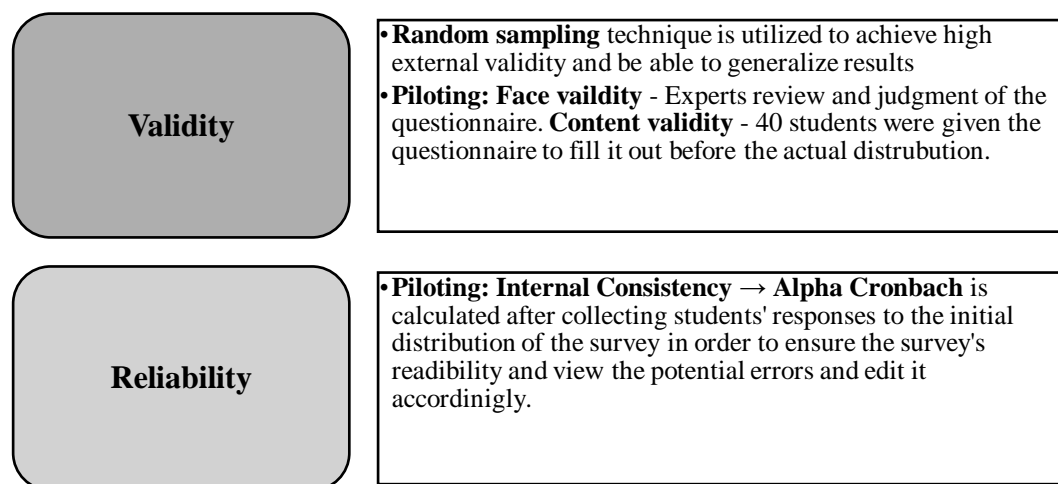


Figure 4. Procedures of Ensuring Validity & Reliability of the Quantitative method

Furthermore, the instructions for the questionnaire were provided in the first section which briefly explains the research topic and purpose as well as details about survey in simplified English that matches students' levels of proficiency. In addition to the general instructions, some questions are multiple choice and, for those questions, students are given

reminders of the possibility to select more than one answer. Clear and well-formed instructions can markedly increase questionnaire reliability and reduce misunderstandings of questions. Following the previously mentioned procedures can also increase replicability of the present research using the same effective tools, instructions, and explanations.

The quantitative data is analysed using SPSS software and displayed and interpreted using the descriptive approach. The descriptive research design associated with the quantitative phase provides direct answers to my research questions posed in the beginning of the research. Therefore, the quantitative data is reported and described in three main phases according to the correspondent research questions. For example, the results of the first section in the survey are reported as possible answers to the first research question. Results from the same question type are reported collectively, for instance, results from the 5-point Likert scales are analysed and described in the same section. Similarly, one-response and multiple response question results are shown in two different sections. The quantitative analysis phase focuses on reporting numerical results and qualitative results can provide answers to research questions. Therefore, the present research does not aim to disprove any hypotheses, rather the main aim here is to provide generalizable explanatory answers.

3.5. Semi-structured Interviews

The qualitative instrument, namely semi-structured interview, is an open method wherein each participant is given the opportunity to express, discuss, and critique points or questions about their experiences with few restrictions. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement the questionnaire with the aim of enhancing understanding, deepening interpretation, and revealing unpredictable underlying answers on the topic. The interviews were conducted in Arabic on the phone based at the participants' convenience. The interviews were audio-recorded, and it took approximately 30 minutes to interview each student. The interview questions were developed and sequenced based on Bloom's

Taxonomy's action verbs as shown in Figure 5 (Appendix A). The data was transcribed in Arabic, then translated and analysed in English. The qualitative data is analysed using NVIVO software based on the thematic coding approach which facilitates the data-gathering and theme-generation processes. To increase the confirmability and dependability of the qualitative results, the following chapter analyses students' responses to the interviews question. Full transcripts of the qualitative data are provided in Appendix (B).

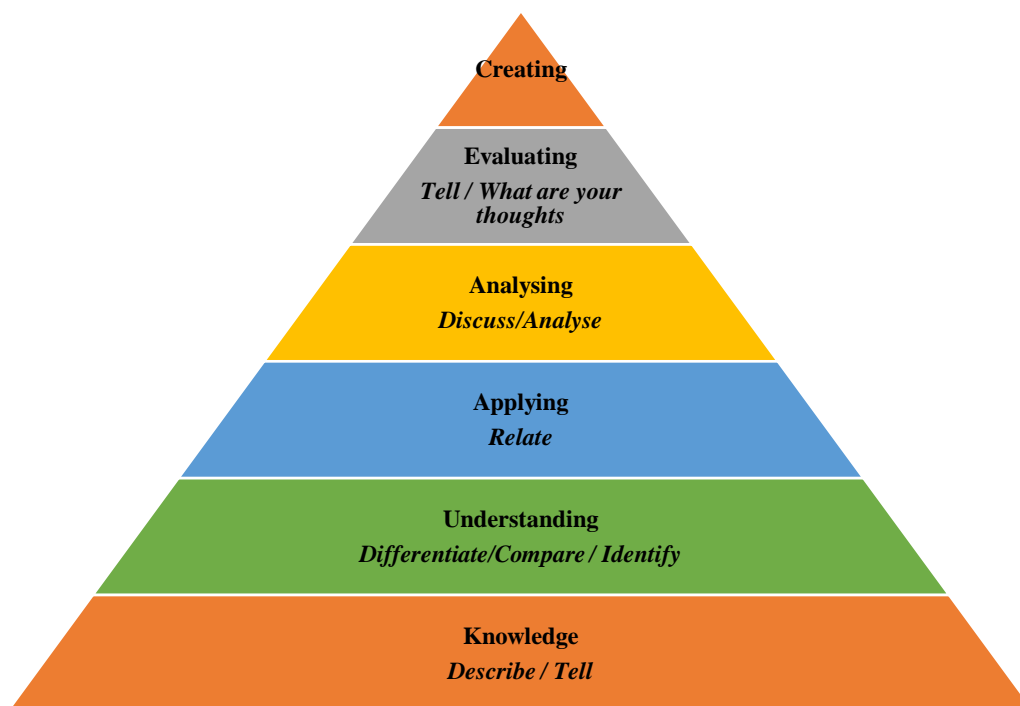


Figure 5. Bloom's Taxonomy Action Verbs Used in the Interview Questions

3.6. Ethical Considerations

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

after the final data analyses, participants in the interviews were informed of the findings to ensure the reliability of the results.

Data Analysis and Results

According to the mixed-methods design, sequential explanatory results of quantitative data are reported and then supported by the qualitative findings. The following stages (as shown in figure 6. are divided based on the three research questions. The first research question has quantitative answers that are supported by explanations and further interpretations from the interviews data where relevant qualitative responses are available. The second research question is interpreted quantitatively, whereas the third research question is answered using data obtained from the interviews.

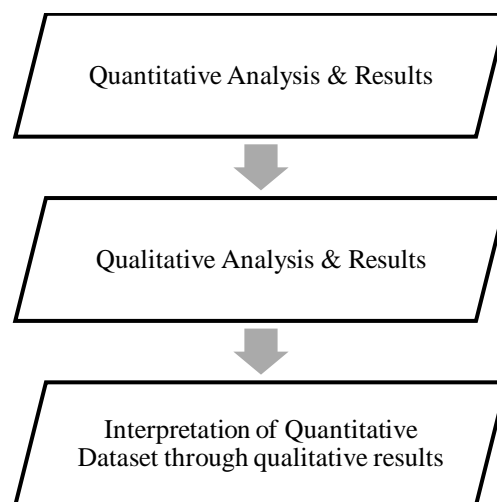


Figure 6. Procedures of Analysing Quantitative & Qualitative Data

First Research Question

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

4.1. General Perception Scale

4.1.1. Likert Scale Items

To interpret the Likert scale results, the mean (M) score and standard deviation (SD) were calculated for each item. In addition, the mean score and standard deviation were calculated for the General Perception scale, which had a mean of 3.55 and a standard deviation of 0.63. All the means and standard deviations, as well as the item texts, are shown below in Table 1. In general, most students' responses ranged from neutral to positive, which indicated their positive opinions about the usefulness of FBWCs. Slightly high levels of positive opinions occurred in items 2 and 4 ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.48$; $M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.13$), respectively.

Table 1. Results of the General Perception Scale

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

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

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

4.1.2. Description of Check-box Items

This section will report the most frequently selected answer of each item. In the General Views section, when participants were asked at what writing stage they prefer the FBWC to be administered, **(70%) selected *Revising and editing***. When asked what roles they prefer to play as students during the feedback-based meeting, **(64%) selected *Listener***. As explained by one of them, *'I like her [the teacher] explaining everything in texts then, if there's a necessity to talk, she could ask us about our opinions on particular points. . . . She's more of an expert'*. When participants were asked about the areas they would like their teacher to focus on more, **(69%) selected *Organization***. When participants were asked about the final grade of their written work is better, **(44%) selected *Another due date after editing your work accordingly***. In addition, when participants were asked about what type of setting they preferred for the FBWCs, **(43%) selected *Class***. Participants expressed their desire to receive writing feedback in a quiet environment that is suitable for either mode of FBWC. The conferencing location could have an impact on students' understanding of the feedback, as explained by participants. However, some believe that understanding is dependent on the quality of the teacher's feedback and that the place of conferencing and conferencing modes can only have minor impact on the FBWCs. When they were asked about what time duration they thought would be adequate for the meeting with their teacher, **(35%) selected *15 minutes***. When students were asked about how many meetings with their writing teacher they

think would be enough for receiving feedback, (51%) selected *Depends on the amount of errors/problems*.

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

The results of the first three items indicate participants' satisfaction and positive views on FBWCs. Regarding Gen_4, the results indicate neutral responses that are identified through the qualitative results. The qualitative results indicate varied opinions on the preferred source of feedback during the FBWC. Some participants, (*participants C & E*), explained the value of teacher feedback that is supported by peer feedback during the group FBWCs, observing that this type of feedback could *'improve my critical thinking skills when I try to analyse others' texts'*. Another participant added that *'it definitely will improve my social and studying skills'* (*participant F*). Participants articulated several different benefits of peer feedback: *'each one notices different things ... We're processing information differently so they can notice points that the other person didn't'* (*participant I*). Another reason for peer feedback preference was that *'we can help each other through the writing process and notify each other when something needs to be fixed'*, and *'this could be before or after the feedback from the teacher. It depends'* (*participants H & C*). Moreover, the students emphasized teacher guidance in the case of peer feedback: *'It'd be helpful if the teacher to go over their [peer] feedback to each other and guide this process'* (*participant I*).

Conversely, other participants assert that students can never give useful feedback, and even though students are provided with evaluation from their peers, they don't take this feedback seriously. Participants prefer the teacher to be *'the primary corrector'* (*participant I*) of their texts and for peer evaluation to be done only for extra feedback. For example, participants suggest that peer evaluation should be *'private, without the teacher being present or before the meeting'* (*participant H*). Some students can only rely on the teacher's feedback and say they should not receive peer feedback as the teacher is the only reliable person for

this job. Alternatively, said one student, *'If I don't receive feedback from the teacher, I would prefer to evaluate myself instead of having other students as evaluators. . . . Students' participations in the meetings shouldn't involve evaluations'* (participant D). One of the participants claimed, *'it takes time and isn't worth it. . . . We could have extensive feedback from the teacher instead'* (participant F).

Item Gen_6 connects Gen_5 and Gen_7 in page 35. Although the majority of participants are comfortable with FBWCs, a considerable percentage of participants find them to be stressful. Participants revealed some major causes of students' anxiety towards the FBWCs that could be nested under three major themes: their low English proficiency levels in speaking or writing, fear of live evaluation and teacher confrontation, and natural shyness. Therefore, participants suggested some tips that could be employed by teachers to help nervous students. One of the suggested solutions is pre-identifying students' proficiency levels to provide help for lower-level students and adapting the style of delivering feedback to suit their lower levels of English. Using students' first languages, simplified versions of English, and extensive examples are some of the suggested solutions to decrease anxiety levels. Further, some responses concerning students' apprehension during the FBWCs are that the teacher's strict, dehumanizing attitude can hinder them from participating and grasping feedback. Therefore, friendly open conversations and more flexibility in the discussions are suggested points by participants. However, others felt that the teacher should show some degree of formality and seriousness regardless of the informality of discussions in order for the students to take FBWCs seriously.

Second Research Question

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

4.2. Individual and Group FBWCs Scales

4.2.1. Likert Scale Items

The mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for the Individual Feedback scale and the Group Feedback scale. The Individual Feedback scale had a mean of 3.87 and a standard deviation of 0.94; the Group Feedback scale had a mean of 3.63 and a standard deviation of 0.86.

The students' responses to item 3 in the Individual Feedback scale indicated that most of them understood their writing errors, which were explained during the individual FBWCs ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.33$). The calculated means showed a high mean value for item 1 in the Individual Feedback scale ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.41$), regarding the impact of individual FBWCs on improving students' critical thinking skills. Also, the calculated mean of item 5 in the Group Feedback scale, regarding the impact of group FBWCs on improving students' critical thinking skills, showed a lower value ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.26$). Regarding the impact of FBWCs on students' autonomy, presented in items 2 and 6 in the Individual Feedback scale and in the Group Feedback scale, respectively, the mean of individual FBWCs revealed a lower value ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.31$) than the mean of group FBWCs ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.27$). Furthermore, most students revealed that their academic writing skills had improved in group FBWCs ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.37$), as shown in item 1 in the Group Feedback scale.

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

Table 2. Results of the Individual FBWCs Scale

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

Table 3. Results of the Group FBWCs Scale

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

4.2.2. Description of the Check-box Items

In the Group Feedback section, when participants were asked about FBWCs administered in groups, and the suitable number of students in each conference, **(49%) selected 3-5 students**. When they were asked about how the students should be grouped, **(36%) selected *The choice Should be left to students***,

Moreover, those who indicated that they prefer to be listeners, also preferred to receive individual feedback rather than group feedback. The mean of items five and six (Gro5 and Gro6) of those who preferred to be listeners was 3.8 with an SD of 1.1. The mean of items 1 and 2 (Ind1 and Ind2) of those who preferred to be listeners was also 3.8 with 0.99 standard deviation. This means that there is no difference between group or individual feedback for those who indicated that they prefer to be listeners.

4.2.3. *T-test* Results

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

On average, when comparing students' perceived helpfulness of academic writing feedback when offered individually ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.94$) and as a group ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.86$), students tended to find individualized feedback more helpful. A paired sample, or student's *t test*, was conducted to examine whether there were significant differences between the average ratings of individual and group feedback. Results from the *t test* indicated that there were no significant differences between students' perceived helpfulness of academic writing feedback offered individually versus in a group setting ($t_{76} = 1.784$, $p = 0.078$). Figure 7. below represents the means of each variable in density plots. Table 4 below shows the results of the *t test*.

Table 4. Paired Samples *T-Test* Results

Paired Samples T-Test Results				
Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>T</i>	df	<i>P</i>
0.236	1.160	1.784	76	.078

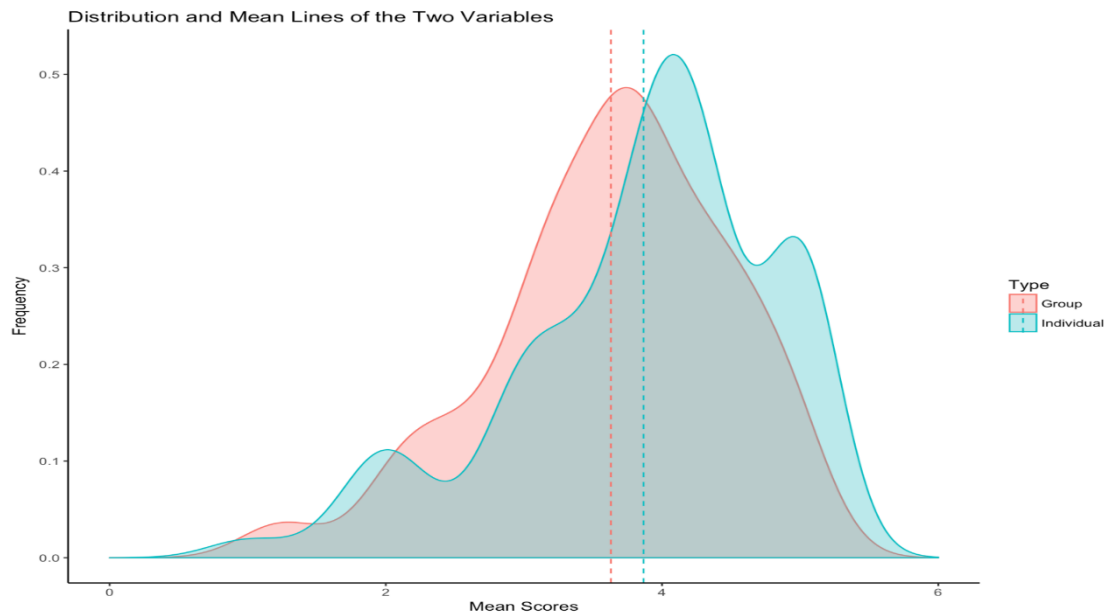


Figure 7. Distribution and Mean Lines of Individual and Group Variables

4.2.4. Correlation Coefficients

The correlation coefficients between the Age variable and Group Feedback, and the Age variable and Individual Feedback were calculated. The results indicated that there is a small negative correlation between participant age and Group Feedback, $r = -0.19$. On the other hand, there is a slight positive correlation between Age and Individual Feedback, $r = 0.047$. The scatter plots in Figures 8 and 9 below depict the correlation coefficients.

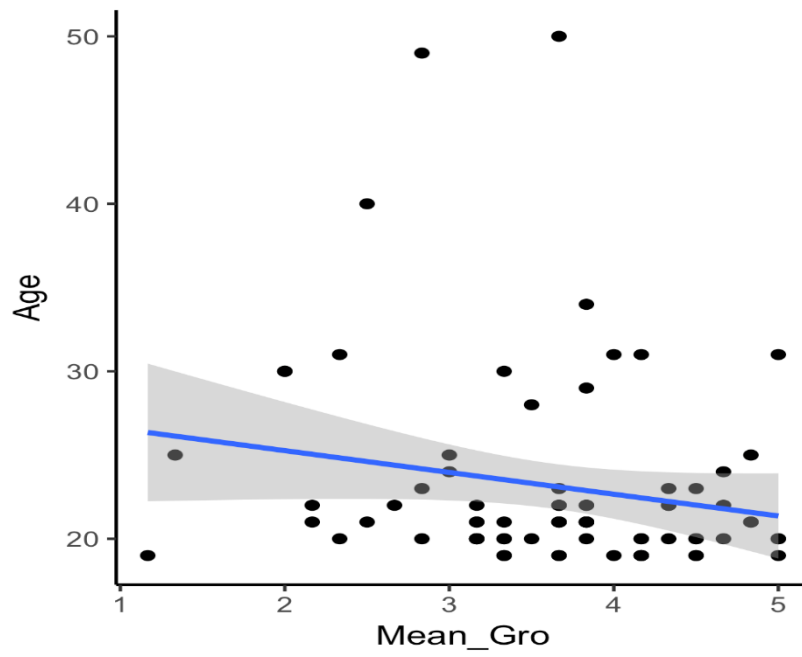


Figure 8. Scatter Plot of Group FBWC Means

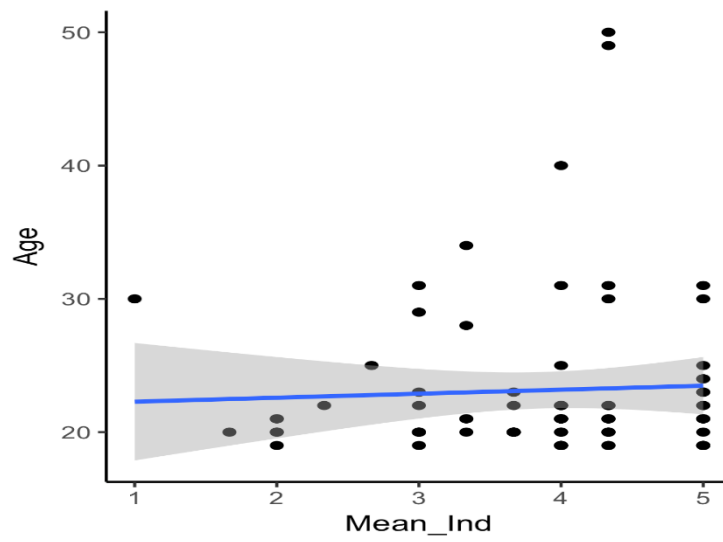


Figure 9. Scatter Plot of Individual FBWC Means

4.3. Third Research Question

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

Major themes from students' responses are sequenced and presented in this section in the order of each theme's frequency, from highest frequency to lowest. As shown in figure10, three major themes are generated from the interviews data that seem considerably correlated with one another. The first theme involves different articulated points expressed by participants that centre on the importance of identifying their preferences and taking those preferences into account before administering FBWC for more effective outcomes. Participants believe that defining their preferences and respecting their choices regarding conducting the FBWC, either individually or in groups, could highly improve their writing outcomes. Moreover, participants discussed the significance of motivation during the FBWC and their needs to receive lucid and adequate feedback that addresses varied individual differences among students. Further, the first theme addresses participants' opinions about the efficacy of FBWCs in terms of the constructive discussions and meaningful negotiation between the writing teacher and her students. The second theme concerns the fact that the participants are freshman students and therefore need to be trained on how to do self-evaluation and give peer feedback effectively and given enough time to prepare before the FBWC. The third and final theme relates to participants' preference for attending the FBWC with students of similar levels of proficiency, ideally as identified by the teacher, as well as students' wishes to have writing sessions supported by feedback conferences. The following paragraphs discuss each theme separately.

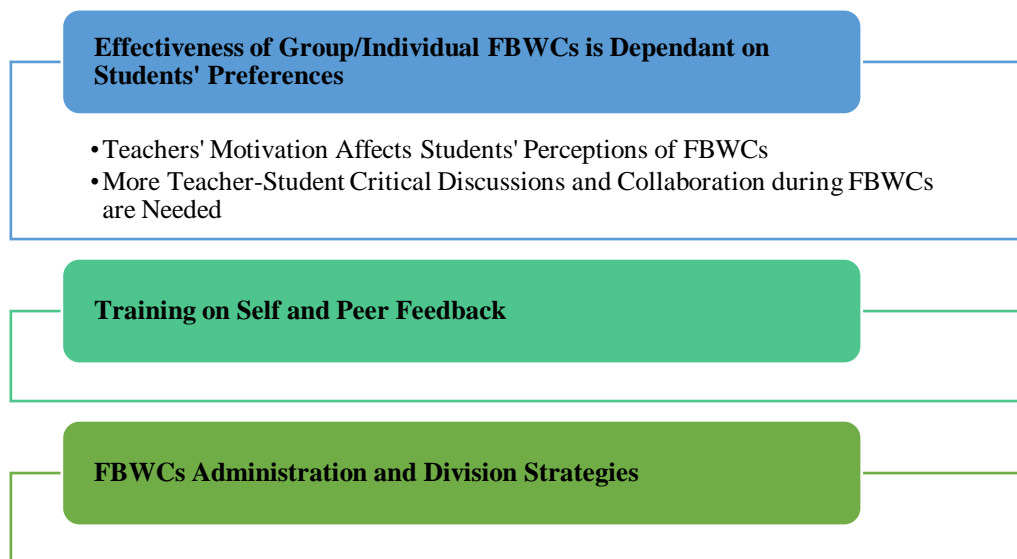


Figure10. Major Generated Themes and sub-themes from the Interviews

First General Theme

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

The first theme generated from students' responses deals mainly with the possibility of the conferencing in one of two settings: individual and group FBWCs. Participants expressed contrasting views on the effectiveness of and preferences for individual and group FBWCs. Some participants mentioned that group FBWCs offer them a better chance to comprehend the teacher's feedback and improve their writing. Participants noted that the collaborative discussions between the teacher and a group of students during the FBWC could increase their comprehension of common writing errors. Participants stated that they would have an opportunity to explore many writing mistakes and understand the teacher's explanations when they attended FBWC in groups. As articulated by one participant, *'we can make use of each other's correction of mistakes and discuss similar issues'* (participant A). Then, she added an additional benefit of group FBWCs: *'If I didn't understand something from the teacher, I would understand it from one of my colleagues'* (participant A). Similarly, another participant felt that *'group meetings are useful especially when I miss some important points articulated*

by the teacher or another student. I can ask other students attending the meeting about it later' (participant F). Further, some participants find group FBWCs to be less stressful, as the teacher equally evaluates multiple texts during one session. For example, one participant explains that *'when I go for the meeting with other students, and all of us have writing mistakes, the situation will be ok and less stressful for me . . . the vibes and atmosphere will be friendlier in group meeting. . . I find more support [in group FBWCs]'* (participant E).

However, the rest of the participants preferred to have individual meetings with their writing teacher, asserting that individual meetings offered them more focused and rich feedback than conferences conducted in groups. One participant asserted that she would have *'private time and wouldn't be interrupted'* by other students when she meets her writing teacher individually (participant C). Another participant added that her understanding will be interrupted, and she will get confused when the teacher's attention and time are distributed to other students' texts and questions, as in the case of group conferencing. Another of the critics of group FBWCs declared, *'I feel more comfortable during the individual meetings because I'll be confident that the teacher will thoroughly review my paper and give me adequate feedback'* (participant F). Participants who agreed on the value of individual FBWCs shared concerns about confusion and an inability to concentrate in group FBWCs, where extensive discussions and questions among students and their teacher could hinder them from grasping the teacher's useful comments. Finally, most participants emphasized the significance of asking students about their preferences beforehand regarding the location of FBWCs to offer students a desirable atmosphere for the feedback: *'when I receive the feedback in a place I'm uncomfortable with, I would probably understand nothing'*, expressed participant E, who suggested that *'the teacher could ask her students first about their preferred place [and style] for feedback'*.

Sub-Theme 1

4.3.1.1. Teachers' Motivation Affects Students' Perceptions of FBWCs

According to the data, when students' preferences are thoroughly identified and effectively implemented in FBWCs, their motivation to improve their writing proficiency level increases and encourages them to attend the FBWCs. One participant noted that creativity and motivation could be fostered by opening with interesting discussions during the FBWCs in addition to keeping the major focus of the conference on writing feedback. One participant stated that *'of course it is the teacher's role to make the meeting more engaging and beneficial'* (participant D). In addition, participants felt that the teacher's attitude plays a significant role in students' motivation; as one participant articulated it, *'teachers need to treat students nicely'* (participant H). Participants need more chances to make mistakes, and their writing attempts should not be penalised but instead be supported by the teacher. *'It's ok to make mistakes; they [teachers] need to understand this. . . We need more chances for repeating mistakes as we're progressing, and this should be understood by writing teachers . . . we will learn from these mistakes'* (participant H). Some responses suggest that group FBWCs can increase students' motivation to attend the FBWC and develop their writing proficiency. One student said, *'the vibes and atmosphere will be friendlier in group meetings'* (participant E). It is possible that students will be more cooperative and collaborative in group meetings.

Sub-Theme 2

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

Another subtheme that is nested under participants' suggestions for better FBWCs is the value of the opportunity for reflection and meaningful negotiations offered to them during

the FBWCs. Teacher–student discussions during the FBWCs are viewed by participants as an essential aspect of effective FBWCs. Participants think that they need to participate in meaning construction and rigorous discussions to comprehend what they have done wrong or/and maintain their strong writing points. Participants also believe that all students attending FBWCs should be active and prepared for open discussions with the teacher and other attending students. Most participants associated effective understanding of writing feedback with students playing active roles during the FBWC. For example, *'I need to participate in order to understand and that it is ineffective to be a listener only . . . I need to negotiate meaning with other participants . . . I wouldn't understand if I didn't talk'* (participant C). Another participant added one of the consequences of not giving students the opportunity to discuss important points with teacher and peers: *'they will be silent throughout the meeting and their writing performance will remain at the same level. . . . Being listeners only means less understanding and less development'* (participant B). Therefore, participants felt it is the teacher's responsibility to frequently ask participants in the FBWC about their views after each discussed point and to try to understand students' points of view to help students improve. As described by one student, *'when I hear comments from other participants, I can view their opinions and the areas they focused on in evaluation that I might not have paid attention to'* (participant B). However, for some students, the FBWCs could be *'embarrassing somehow because they might have a lot of mistakes and wouldn't add much to the discussion. . . . They'd prefer to be listeners'* (participant I). Participants mention that such discussions can function as a useful, less formal tool for constructive evaluations among students since students are at similar levels. On the other hand, some participants prefer the discussion to be led by the teacher, because the teacher's comments are what they mainly need and what would be most likely to benefit them. Moreover, participants stressed that the purpose of FBWCs should be stated and clearly defined by the teacher and students

as well. Participants felt that the core purpose of FBWCs is to help guide them through their writing processes. Finally, participants wished to be allowed to audio-record the conference so they could refer to it when needed, *'to review it later where we can catch up with the missing points'* (participant F).

Second General Theme

4.3.2. Training on Self and Peer Feedback

Given that the sample consisted of first-year English majors, they articulated their desire to be trained on how to perform essential evaluation skills like self-evaluation and peer evaluation so they can use those skills in the FBWCs. Participants recognized that these skills are critical to developing their writing. However, they want the teacher to provide them some time to prepare in advance by reading each other's texts and trying to analyse them before the FBWC to give more beneficial peer feedback: *'we need to review the papers before the meeting and have time to point the errors and write comments'* because *'We are students and still lack some skills'* (participant B). Another expressed need is the timing of FBWC administration. One participant added, *'When the teacher schedules days for feedback meetings, the days should be close enough to the time we wrote our assignments. There shouldn't be a long period between writing the assignment and the feedback. It should be all done within the same week'* (participant G). Participants also suggested that students should be prepared for the FBWCs by bringing their recorded notes and questions to make the most of the FBWC.

Third General Theme

4.3.3. FBWCs Administration and Division Strategies

In addition to students' suggestions for better design and implementation of FBWCs is their desire to be divided into different groups for FBWCs according level of proficiency,

because *'if the students were at the same level, the feedback process would be less difficult'* (participant I). Participants believe that writing teachers should first identify their students' levels of proficiency because lower-level students cannot understand the teacher's feedback or give peer feedback for much more proficient students. Therefore, participants think there should be a division of students into groups with similar English proficiency or that students should be allowed to *'to divide themselves into groups with people they are comfortable with'* (participant F). As shown in the first scale of the questionnaire, most participants believed that the grouping decision should be made by the teacher, and grouping based on language proficiency was viewed as the preferred method for participants. One of the ideas suggested by participants is to have writing sessions followed or preceded by the FBWCs where students can extensively practise academic writing. Participants mentioned some advantages of such writing sessions: *'we can have the opportunity to write under the teacher's guidance'* (participant D), *'we could apply what the teacher has just explained correctly'* (participant F), and *'it can develop my critical thinking and autonomy by practising actual writing in groups where we can write together and then evaluate our texts'* (participant C).

Additionally, participants described several characteristics of effective FBWCs that feature comprehensive writing feedback and suit different learning styles, which can noticeably enhance their motivation. Students expressed their dissatisfaction with insufficient writing feedback that offers them limited and quick feedback, stating that they get no benefits from minimal kinds of feedback. *'I'll repeat the same mistakes if I didn't have enough explanation from the teacher'*, expressed by participant F. Therefore, most participants advised adequate time for the FBWC as all students should receive equal opportunity to participate in the conference. However, participants suggested that the time allotted for each student should be flexible depending on the number of errors. Participants also expressed

their desire to have FBWCs that address students' individual differences in proficiency and offer each of them sufficient feedback at the appropriate level.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, the major findings highlighted in the previous chapter will be discussed in view of the three research questions that centre on students' perceptions, their preferences concerning individual or group FBWCs, and their suggestions for better implementation of FBWCs in foundational academic writing courses. In addition, the results will be interpreted further and will be related to relevant studies regarding the constructs within SCT: scaffolding, ZPD, and the two types of mediation, teacher and peers, in the FBWCs. This study's limitations will be presented and directions of future research on writing feedback will be recommended. Also, implications for EFL teaching will be highlighted.

The topic of writing feedback has been widely investigated within the context of SCT, because SCT is an effective application of the framework (Ngo, 2018; Xiao, 2017; Bijami et al., 2016; Amerian et al., 2014; Barnard & Campbell, 2005). Regarded as a practical model for implementing SCT, the practice of presenting writing feedback to individuals or small groups of students has been discussed in many EFL/ESL research studies (Yeh, 2016; Bayraktar, 2012). However, researchers have suggested that writing teachers need to redefine traditional writing conferences to include a collaborative stance that offers feedback recipients more opportunities to contribute to their writing education (Ewert, 2009).

In the past, teachers have used different scaffolding methods to help students produce accurate texts; for example, to help students construct effective and meaningful essays, teachers have given writing feedback in collaborative and private conference settings. During that stage of the writing process, students have learned how to produce texts in socially and culturally suitable ways by means of teacher-administered conferences featuring consistent,

dynamic feedback. Furthermore, when L2 students collaboratively participated in the process of social dialogues, or *linguaging*, during writing conferences, they engaged in oral and textual language that shaped their written texts linguistically and meaningfully. Ultimately, student participation in collaborative processes to create meaning has served to develop and mediate individual writing abilities (Jianling, 2018). In addition to learning linguistic and textual patterns, other benefits of collaborative FBWCs are the noticeable impacts on students' social practices and on the relationship between students and their teachers. It is noteworthy that variability in the students' progress rates in FBWCs is feature of L2 learning, because each student progresses differently according to the ZPD (Jianling, 2018).

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

Students also believed they were likely to advance in their writing levels when given an opportunity to have constructive conversations with their teacher—conversations that featured simplified explanations of different parts of their texts. The preference for oral feedback could be attributed to the opportunity given to students in which they freely discussed their errors through interactional dialogues with their writing teacher (Marzban & Sarjami, 2014). In their research, Marzban and Sarjami (2014) found that collaborative

dialogic conversations during writing conferences could enhance comprehension and communication to make the feedback process more beneficial and desirable for students. Hyland (2003) also found feedback processes to be influential when students attending a conference were actively involved participants who significantly contributed to their learning processes as well as to the processes of other participants (cited in Sobhani & Tayebipour, 2015, p. 1602). Additional research has shown that students' writing knowledge facilitated their involvement within *intermental development zones* to independently engage in reflection, analysis, and synthesis activities (Nicholas & Paatsch, 2014; Ewert, 2009).

Regarding the procedures and focus of feedback conference administration, Jianling's (2018) study examined the effect that collaborative sessions during the prewriting and planning stages had on the students' final products. The author concluded that different modes of communication should be utilised throughout the writing process to maximise learning. In the present study, however, students expressed a preference for FBWCs to occur in the final stages of writing, namely, during the editing and revising of texts. The data also showed that students believed they needed more autonomy and freedom in content planning and writing. Furthermore, students believed that the major form of feedback support from the teacher—in this case, conferencing—should not interfere with their ideas and written content. Most of the students appeared to have issues with general organization and the structure of their texts; they wanted the FBWC to address those issues. Major suggestions generated from the data were the students' needs to be divided into groups of similar English proficiency, in the case of group FBWCs, so that they could share mutual issues and levels of understanding.

As previous studies have suggested, the kinds of needs that emphasised taking individual differences into account were mostly applicable to live, oral types of feedback, such as conferencing. A number of studies have explained that written feedback, for example, could not address these needs because it focused on written language and form; to the contrary,

interactional types of feedback can address these needs. Moreover, written feedback could fail to address factors correlated with students' writing levels, such as learning styles and pre-identification of language proficiency, which can noticeably affect the quality and amount of feedback, and hence, writing development (Sobhani & Tayebipour, 2015; Marzban & Sarjami, 2014).

Numerous researchers have suggested that there should be a balanced implementation of different feedback methods tailored within conferencing to meet students' varied learning styles. They also have suggested an inclusive feedback method for writing development (Sobhani & Tayebipour, 2015; Marzban & Sarjami, 2014; Macallister, 2006; Jordan, 2004). Macallister's (2006) findings, which were compatible with students' discussed needs in the present study, suggested that writing feedback, in order to be holistic and adequate, should cover both form and meaning aspects of the texts.

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

On the other hand, students also expressed the possibility that anxiety, shyness, and a lack of English proficiency could be underlying reasons to their role as primarily listeners throughout feedback conferencing. In a similar vein, Abdulkhaleq et al.'s (2013) observation of students and teachers' attitudes during conferencing revealed that the students' lack of engagement as well as participation was due to their low English language competence and their anxious state when addressing the teacher. Aside from previously highlighted factors that may have contributed to students' silence during FBWCs, it is worth noting that their silence may have been a consequence of the teacher's dominant stance during the discussions (Abdulkhaleq et al., 2013; Chen, 2005). With that in mind, Abdulkhaleq et al. (2013) recommended an 'ice breaking' technique to increase motivation and collaboration among conference students: talking about trending news and current issues to promote rapport. Afterwards, the conference session could be initiated in a more friendly atmosphere because the students were put at ease (Abdulkhaleq et al., 2013).

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

The processes of understanding might not be constructed solely through singular practices, such as individualised or teacher-dominated feedback. In individualised feedback,

dialogical interactions required structured and focused routes to achieve effective one-on-one conferences with better communication (Nicholas & Paatsch, 2014). Abiddin and West (2007) noted that students who took active roles further developed their understanding of writing, improved their English proficiency, and effectively practiced what they had learned while explaining their texts to other participants. Hence, a motivational environment for receiving writing feedback can be established when all participants take active roles in FBWC discussions and engage in reflective conversations that are mentored and scaffolded by the teacher. Regardless, students in the current study expressed a need to be directed by their teacher who had expertise and could guide them to take active roles during conferencing. When students felt secure and guided by their teacher, who was the main source of feedback about their texts, they could participate effectively in meaningful analyses and in peer- and self-evaluations (cited in Ewert, 2009, p. 251; Weissberg, 2006).

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

In sum, students have indicated their willingness for meaningful collaboration; they have expressed their need to be supported and scaffolded in writing sessions where they have

received proficient peer feedback and have been involved in constructive collegial discussions. Most importantly, as observed in this study, was their need to learn how to effectively evaluate others' texts. Similarly, one study found that training students to evaluate their peers' writing was more critical to success than exposing them to different texts and teaching them how to fix their errors according to the teacher's feedback. Training students to effectively critique and analyse peers' texts can improve the peer evaluator's writing ability. Moreover, researchers found that following a 'collaborative' stance when training students to respond and evaluate peers' texts was more effective for constructive feedback than the 'prescriptive' stance that focused on form feedback (Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992). Consequently, various beneficial skills, such as autonomy and social skills, could be developed in these collaborative practices that also served to increase a student's sense of cooperation, understanding of logic, and sense of community (Nosratinia & Nikpanjeh, 2015). In addition, students' confidence levels and awareness fostered by readers of their texts within regular FBWCs can result in successful EFL students with a strong academic identity (Mochizuki, 2018).

5.1. Implications for L2 Teaching and Recommendations

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

In attending to students' anxiety levels during FBWCs, researchers have proposed several ways to reduce that anxiety. Increasing students' awareness of the purpose of FBWCs and implementing ice-breaking conversations at the beginning of a session has appeared to ease anxiety in university-level students (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990). For example, Eckstein (2013) recommended that teachers should build teaching objectives and structure the conference based on thorough analyses of students' needs and preferences. Eckstein (2013) made the recommendation after noting students' views on the importance of a teacher taking into account the English proficiency levels when responding to students with different interactional styles. In addition, some researchers have proposed that writing teachers should encourage students to document all writing errors and issues covered in a conference by note-taking or audio recording and then summarized at the end of the conference by the teacher to improve writing skills (Abdulkhaleq et al., 2013; Liu, 2009).

Furthermore, to provide a more systematic implementation of conferencing, an agenda for the semester or year could be set and defined by the teacher and students to meet the ultimate goals (Liu, 2009). Researchers found that students who regularly received timely and constructive feedback from writing teachers outperformed other students who received less informative and inconsistent feedback (Yang, Hu, & Zhang, 2014). Therefore, it is essential that writing teachers plan adequate FBWCs to foster previously discussed skills and to regularly mentor students' writing after each new writing lesson or newly introduced element.

5.2. Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

This study's aim was to understand students' perceptions about FBWCs from different viewpoints. Focus was directed towards the major beliefs and perceptions of first-year students majoring in English regarding the effectiveness of an important type of feedback for foundational academic writing courses: FBWCs. Prior to initiating their academic studies, it

is essential to identify and analyse the students' challenges and needs; doing so can help to provide them with a more sufficient learning environment. However, it is noteworthy to acknowledge some limitations of the present study that mainly were time constraints and small sample size.

Moreover, due to the segregation in Saudi Arabia's educational system, only females were targeted in this study. Therefore, further studies should attempt to explore and identify the views of both male and female students in their preparatory year of English instruction to provide more holistic, generalizable, and thorough results. Hence, real solutions, effective adaptations, and advancements can be introduced to a core element of EFL instruction, and academic writing. Additionally, to investigate the effectiveness and impact of current feedback strategies on student writing levels, future studies could examine the academic writing achievements of EFL students who were exposed to FBWCs during their first year in other academic institutions.

In terms of this study's methodology, the semi-structured interviews supplemented the data obtained from the survey in order to collect as many responses as possible about the students' perceptions and preferences regarding FBWCs. Future studies could combine further data collection methods. For example, a qualitative phenomenological study could be done in which students are asked about their learning experiences using interviews in addition to classroom observations could be employed to determine writing problems. Numerical data could be used to supplement a qualitative method; writing performance could be measured with a prewriting test before the FBWC and a post-test at the end of the conference. In summary, the EFL literature lacks research about advanced EFL learners and their challenges with essential language skills, such as academic writing. Further research to improve writing feedback strategies and to maintain solid English proficiency can benefit many EFL students, especially those who seek mastery level learning.

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