

Usability of Teacher Written Feedback: Exploring Feedback Practices and Perceptions of Teachers and Students

Jingjing Ma

(maggiema@hsmc.edu.hk)

Hang Seng Management College, Hong Kong, PR China

Abstract

Despite research on teacher written feedback on L2 students' writing (e.g. Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinti, 1997; Lee, 2007), much needs to be known about the usability of teacher feedback (i.e. whether teacher feedback carries potential for students to act upon it to improve their writing) from teachers' and students' points of view. From a formative perspective (Brown & Glover, 2006; Fernandez-Toro, Truman, & Walker, 2013; Walker, 2009, 2013), this exploratory study investigates: (1) two Hong Kong college EFL teachers' written feedback practices concerning the final products of their students' academic writing in terms of the purpose of teacher feedback (e.g. to point out a strength or weakness), aspects of performance that it focused on (e.g. content or skills development), and the depth of feedback; and (2) teacher and student perceptions of the usability of teacher feedback as well as the relationship between the two. The findings show that both teachers commented on the strengths and weaknesses of students' writing, provided feedback according to the assessment criteria and emphasized skills development more than content, but they differed in terms of the depth of feedback. Both convergence and divergence have been identified in teacher and student perceptions of the usability of teacher written feedback. The pedagogical implications of the findings have also been discussed.

1 Introduction

In L2 writing, providing written feedback to students assumes great importance and it is the teacher's most crucial task (Ferris et al., 1997). From a formative perspective, feedback should afford the opportunity for the recipient to act upon it to close the gap between current performance and desired performance (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In other words, it has to be usable by the recipient (Walker, 2009). However, in L2 writing research, little attention has been paid to the perceived usability of teacher written feedback and the relationship between teacher and student perceptions. Investigating whether teachers' and students' assumptions and perceptions are aligned with each other enables the two parties to work together to achieve the goal of improving students' writing. It is therefore essential to gain a good understanding of teachers' written feedback practices, the ways in which teachers and students perceive the usability of teacher written feedback, and the relationship between teacher and student perceptions. This exploratory study aims to address these issues by investigating an EFL academic writing course at the tertiary level, where feedback on assignments is under researched (Weaver, 2006).

2 Review of the literature

2.1 Usability of teacher feedback

Feedback plays a central role in promoting student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In terms of learning, feedback refers to information about the gap between a learner's actual and desired level of knowledge, understanding, and skill, which is used to close the gap between current and desired performance (Black & Wiliam 1998; Sadler, 1989). This definition shows that for feedback to perform its formative function, it should be utilized to close the gap between a learner's current and desired performance (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Therefore, teacher feedback should afford the potential for learners to take action to improve learning. This is what makes teacher feedback usable. Usable teacher feedback, however, does not necessarily mean that it will actually be used by learners. In the case of L2 writing, many factors may affect whether students utilize usable teacher feedback for their current or future writing (e.g. students lacking motivation; students feeling that teacher feedback is incorrect or not reasonable; students' inability to use teacher feedback for effective revision; Goldstein, 2004). Despite all these factors, L2 writing teachers should nevertheless provide usable feedback, which serves as a precondition for students to act on it to improve their learning.

2.2 Analyzing teacher written feedback practices from a usability perspective

Although little research in L2 writing has been conducted to analyze teachers' written feedback practices from a usability perspective, feedback research across disciplines in higher education, as demonstrated by the work of Brown and Glover (2006), Fernandez-Toro et al. (2013), and Walker (2009, 2013), has developed a way of classifying written comments in relation to the concept of usability based on the literature related to formative assessment (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Feedback comments in the aforementioned studies were coded according to the following five categories:

- (1) Comments about the content of a student's response (e.g. appropriateness of what has been included, accuracy of the material, the balance of the material, omission of relevant material, the quality of the examples or evidence used, quality of the argument, etc.);
- (2) Comments that help a student to develop appropriate skills (e.g. generic matters such as the structure of the response, the style and clarity of the writing, correct use of English, referencing, etc.);
- (3) Motivational comments (e.g. praise and encouragement);
- (4) Demotivational comments (e.g. use of negative words or phrases and judgemental language);
- (5) Comments that encourage further learning (e.g. reference to future study or assessment, reference to resource materials, etc.)

Comments in the first two categories can also be analyzed in terms of depth, which reflects the extent to which feedback may help students improve their learning:

Level 1: Acknowledge a weakness;

Level 2: Provide a correction;

Level 3: Explain why the student's response is inappropriate/why the correction is a preferred response.

Based on the definition of feedback mentioned earlier, level 1 feedback seems to only indicate the existence of a performance gap without explaining why or giving the learner the information needed to close it. Level 2 feedback conveys information about how to close the gap and by doing so indicates its existence, but such feedback does not explain why there is a gap or why it is necessary to close it in the way as suggested by the feedback. Level 3 feedback contains not only information conveyed by level 1 feedback (i.e. indicating the existence of a performance gap) and/or level 2 feedback (i.e. giving students information needed to close the gap), but also an explanation for it.

Motivating comments may also be coded according to depth:

Level 1: an indication that something is praiseworthy;

Level 2: an amplification relating to the praise;

Level 3: an explanation of why the element of the work being praised is good.

With the aforementioned coding scheme, researchers in higher education have examined teachers' written feedback practices in different disciplines. Analyzing teacher written feedback from six biological and physical sciences modules, Brown and Glover (2006) found that the three major categories of feedback offered were content, skills development, and motivational comments. The teachers provided more content comments than skills development ones, and offered level 2 feedback (i.e. providing a correction) most frequently. A similar pattern was found in Walker's (2009) study, in which teacher written feedback from three technology modules were analyzed. However, a somewhat different pattern emerged in Fernandez-Toro et al.'s (2013) study: the teachers from two Spanish modules were also found to give motivational comments, but they offered far more skills development comments than content ones. Although they also tended to give level 2 feedback most frequently, there was a higher proportion of level 1 and 3 feedback compared with Walker's (2009) study. According to Fernandez-Toro et al. (2013), the above-mentioned differences in teacher written feedback practices can be attributed to disciplinary differences.

To shed light on teachers' written feedback practices in L2 writing, researchers have investigated different characteristics of teacher written feedback, such as its focus (Lee, 2007), pragmatic aims (Ferris et al., 1997), linguistic forms (Ferris et al., 1997), function (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Lee, 2007), strategies used in error feedback (Lee, 2007), criteria used in grading (Lee, 2007), and so forth, but little research has been conducted from a usability perspective. This study thus intends to fill this gap by adopting an adapted version of the aforementioned coding scheme to investigate two purposefully chosen EFL writing teachers' written feedback practices in relation to usability. Although the coding scheme was applied to one-off assignments in tertiary level distance learning contexts where face-to-face communication may be more limited, it is still highly relevant to the current study, because writing teachers have been found to often provide written feedback only on the final products of student writing (Ferris, 2014), so they tend to put great efforts into writing very detailed comments, with such feedback serving as one of the major channels to inform students of teacher opinions of student work and help them improve. These comments thus bear resemblance to teacher feedback on one-off assignments and deserve careful analysis.

2.3 Student and teacher perceptions of teacher feedback

Studies on L2 students' perceptions of teacher written feedback have pursued two general lines of inquiry: the first concerns students' preferences for teacher feedback such as the type of feedback they would like to receive (e.g. whether they prefer feedback on local or global issues; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Lee, 2008; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988); the second concerns student reactions to teacher feedback already received such as their perceptions of what teacher feedback actually focused on and their subsequent actions (e.g. Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995; Lee, 2008; Treglia, 2008). Despite all this research, there seems to be limited discussion of student perceptions of teacher written feedback around the notion of usability. Feedback research in higher education, however, has investigated this topic and its findings are reviewed below.

Research on student perceptions of teacher written feedback from a usability perspective has examined student responses to motivational feedback as well as content and skills development comments. The most frequent responses to motivational comments were feeling pleased or encouraged in both technology and language (i.e. Spanish) modules (Fernandez-Toro et al., 2013; Walker, 2009). It is thus suggested that motivational comments may be emotionally usable, because students may feel good about and remain engaged with their work (Fernandez-Toro et al., 2013). The second most frequent response by technology students to motivational comments was "lack of understanding/need for more explanation or detail" (Walker, 2009). Based on this, it has been suggested that

motivational comments with an element of explanation might be usable metacognitively (i.e. strategic usability), because comments may help students develop their existing strengths in future assignments based on an understanding of what they did well exactly and why (Fernandez-Toro et al., 2013). Regarding content and skills comments, “lack of understanding/need for more explanation or detail” was either the most frequent response or the second most frequent response by technology students and language students (Fernandez-Toro et al., 2013; Walker, 2009). Student perceptions in these two studies indicate that content or skills development comments, if explained, tend to be more usable, because such feedback is more likely to be understood. It is also pointed out that skills development comments may be more usable than content comments by serving as ‘feed forward’ to address future gaps related to generic issues that may reoccur in students’ future work without intervention (Walker, 2009, 2013).

There is limited research on L2 teachers’ perceptions of the feedback they give. As pointed out by Ferris (2014), teachers’ voices seem to be the missing link in the research on teacher response. Studies on L2 writing teachers’ perceptions or philosophies of their feedback practices have investigated teachers’ values and principles guiding their response behaviours in general (e.g. Ferris, 2014; Min, 2013) and their perceptions of the amount and type of teacher feedback (i.e. global or local aspects of student work) in particular (e.g. Montgomery & Baker, 2007). Despite this research, little is known about writing teachers’ perceptions of the usability of their written feedback. This provides the impetus for the current study.

Despite research on students’ perceptions of teacher feedback as mentioned earlier, students’ perceptions are rarely compared with teachers’ perceptions. Among the limited studies on L2 writing teachers’ and their students’ beliefs about written feedback, both convergence and divergence have been identified (e.g. Amrhein & Nassaji, 2008; Diab, 2005; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Schulz, 2001). These studies mainly investigated students’ and teachers’ perceptions concerning the amount and/or type of written feedback on early and final drafts. For example, in Montgomery and Baker’s (2007) study, students’ perceptions regarding the amount and type of teacher written feedback generally coordinated well with their teachers’ perceptions. In Amrhein and Nassaji’s (2008) study, however, students’ preference for the amount of error feedback differed from their teachers’ views. Previous research seems to focus on students’ and teachers’ perspectives on the amount and type of teacher written feedback, and much research is needed to examine the perceived usability of teacher written feedback on the students’ and teachers’ part as well as the relationship between the two

3 The study

3.1 Research questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. From a formative perspective, what are the two teachers’ written feedback practices in the current study?
- RQ2. What are the teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the usability of teacher written feedback and what is the relationship between the two?

3.2 Context

The study was conducted in the context of a 14-week English for Academic Purposes course in a self-financing tertiary education institution in Hong Kong. This course was chosen because academic writing was its major component, thus offering great potential for studying teacher written feedback on students’ papers. The course required students to complete two writing tasks, an informative essay and an argumentative essay, which accounted for 20% and 40% of the course grade, respectively. The students were required to write on the same topic for both papers. Two female teachers, Audrey and Helen, showed great enthusiasm about this exploratory study and were willing to participate in it. This study thus focused on one class taught by each teacher and their written

feedback on student writing. There were 21 students in each teacher's class. Each class met twice each week for one and a half hours each time.

3.3 *Data collection*

To answer RQ1, teacher written feedback on the informative and argumentative essays was collected and analyzed to gain a deep understanding of the teachers' written feedback practices. To answer RQ2, a student survey was used to obtain a general picture of student perceptions of teacher feedback, with particular items focusing on the usability of teacher feedback (Tables 5 and 6). Six-point Likert scales were used with 1 being 'strongly disagree' and 6 being 'strongly agree'. Interviews were also held with students and their teachers to ascertain the perceived usability of teacher written feedback from three dimensions, which will be discussed in the next section: purpose (i.e. strength-related vs. weakness-related), aspect of performance (i.e. content vs. skills development), and depth of feedback (i.e. level 1, level 2, level 3 feedback). Student and teacher perceptions were triangulated with teacher written feedback.

3.4 *Data analysis*

To answer RQ1, the two teachers' end comments on the final drafts of the informative and argumentative essays were analyzed. Although the students were asked to write more than one draft for each task, they received mainly peer feedback on interim drafts, while teacher written feedback was reserved for final drafts. A preliminary analysis of teacher feedback showed that in-text comments were brief language-focused feedback, while end comments were more detailed and related to different aspects of student writing. That is, they are "longer, more substantive, and more discursive remarks" on students' writing overall (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, p. 190). For this reason, this study focused only on end comments (and comments provided on a separate feedback sheet) to gauge the teachers' written feedback practices from a usability perspective.

The teachers' end comments were divided into feedback points, that is, one or several sentences dealing with one particular issue. For example, "End of text citation: very good!" or "Misuse of 'therefore'. Work hard on transitional words!" can be regarded as one feedback point. If one sentence deals with more than one issue, then it is considered to contain more than one feedback point. For example, there are two feedback points in the comment "Quite well-argued, but a lot of unrelated ideas.", since one feedback point deals with the quality of argumentation and the other with the relevance of ideas.

Brown and Glover's (2006) coding scheme was adapted to accommodate the analysis of teacher written feedback in this study. Firstly, categories 4 and 5 (see previous section) were removed because these two categories seldom occurred in the current data. For example, when teachers commented on weaknesses of student performance, they did not frequently use negative and judgemental language. Secondly, categories 1 and 2 seemed to be gauging two dimensions at the same time: they reflected not only the aspect of performance addressed by teacher feedback (i.e. content or skills development), but also the purpose of teacher feedback (i.e. to point out weaknesses). Meanwhile, category 3 (i.e. motivational comments) seemed to be more related to the purpose of feedback, because such comments are intended to acknowledge strengths and encourage students. Therefore, a new dimension related to purpose of feedback was added and thus teacher written feedback can be categorized into strength-related or weakness-related. Thirdly, the original five categories showing aspect of performance were reduced to two, namely, content and skills development. Moreover, although the coding scheme has been used in studies across disciplines (e.g. Brown & Glover, 2006; Fernandez-Toro et al., 2013; Walker, 2009) and proved its usefulness, it does not seem to emphasize that teacher feedback should be related to the assessment criteria. For example, when level 1 feedback (e.g. acknowledging a weakness) or level 2 feedback (e.g. providing a correction) is provided, it is unknown whether teacher feedback is offered according to the key features of a quality performance as prescribed by the assessment criteria or teachers' own idiosyncratic criteria. Therefore, the

adapted coding scheme also looks at whether teacher written feedback is related to the assessment criteria or not. Fourthly, this study also applied depth of feedback to analyzing strength-focused comments. To accommodate the current data, level 1 feedback acknowledges a strong point, level 2 feedback encourages continued use of a good skill or strategy, while level 3 feedback explains a strong point and/or continued use of a good skill or strategy in the future. In short, the revised scheme consisted of three dimensions: purpose (i.e. strength-related vs. weakness-related), aspect of performance (i.e. content vs. skills development), and depth of feedback (i.e. level 1, level 2, level 3 feedback). Following Fernandez-Toro et al.'s (2013) suggestion, teacher written feedback was first coded according to the purpose of feedback, and then coded according to category and depth (p. 824). The following examples show how the adapted coding scheme was applied to teacher written feedback.

The content shows that you have done reasonably good research for your first essay. (strength-related, content, level 1 – acknowledging a strength)

But of course, I DO very much appreciate the research and more importantly your own interpretation/ analysis you have invested/ followed up after presenting the factual findings/ results of the studies/ research! That's precious to keep and I want you to do the same, or even MORE, in your future writing/ our next essay! (strength-related, content, level 2 – encouraging continued use of a good skill or strategy)

Not bad with the conclusion: you did a quick summary/ capture the highlights of your whole essay and point to the future/ drop a line of the implication ‘..that is how she will stay’. (strength-related, skills development, level 3 – explaining a strength)

A lot of arguments and elaborations are not related to the topic sentences. (weakness-related, content, level 1 – acknowledging a weakness)

There are more problems in the list of references. You need to check last names of authors very carefully so as to avoid careless typing mistakes. (weakness-related, skills development, level 2 – providing suggestion)

You might still be looking at one big grammatical improvement to make:
AGREEMENT. Singular subject needs a singular verb form; plural subject needs a plural verb form. Simple as that, my dear! Just proofread once or twice before submission and I'm pretty sure you could have spotted the mistakes yourself! (weakness-related, skills development, level 3 – explaining a problem and suggestion)

To answer RQ2, student survey data were analyzed using SPSS to provide descriptive statistics. Teacher and student interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed. The transcription was read several times and assigned codes. Constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was then used to identify emerging themes concerning student and teacher perceptions of the usability of teacher written feedback along the following dimensions: purpose of feedback, aspect of performance and depth of feedback.

4 Findings

4.1 *The two teachers' written feedback practices*

Table 1 shows the distribution of teacher written feedback along the dimensions of purpose of feedback (i.e. strength-related vs. weakness-related), aspect of performance (i.e. content vs. skills development) and the depth of feedback across two tasks. When it comes to the purpose of feedback, both teachers commented on the strengths and weaknesses of student writing, with a focus on the latter. This pattern could be observed across tasks (Tables 2 and 3). In terms of aspects of performance commented on, both provided feedback on areas contained in the assessment criteria, including content, language, organization, and citation (Table 4). Both focused more on skills development than content overall (Table 1). This pattern could also be observed for each teacher across tasks

(Tables 2 and 3). Concerning the depth of feedback, the two teachers seemed to follow a distinctive pattern. Overall Audrey tended to give level 1 feedback (i.e. to acknowledge a strength or weakness) the most frequently across content and skills development, no matter whether she commented on the strengths or weaknesses of student writing. For weakness-related comments, she tended to provide level 2 feedback frequently after level 1 feedback. This pattern can be observed across tasks (Table 2). Overall Helen tended to provide level 3 feedback most frequently regardless of the aspect of performance for both strength- and weakness- related comments (Table 1). This pattern can be ascertained across tasks, except that for the argumentative essay, she gave level 1 rather than level 3 feedback more frequently on skills development when commenting on the strengths of students' writing (Table 3).

The following are some typical examples of each teacher's written feedback:

Nice topic with clear focuses! (Audrey, strength-related, content, level 1)

Some of the sources are missing. (Audrey, weakness-related, skills development, level 1)

. So →, so (Audrey, weakness-related, skills development, level 2)

but the TS1+TS2 outweighs TS3 too much. Perhaps more information of TS3 should be given. (Audrey, weakness-related, content, level 2)

... I'm especially in LOVE with your thesis statement (this invention is a ... I believe that was what you planned as the thesis statement as well, right?). It successfully performed the function of bringing out the FACT and the writer/ your point of view regarding the issue in hand! Keep that up since a thesis statement is essential to ANY kinds of essays/writing, at school and at work later on! (Helen, strength-related, skills development, level 3)

And that brings me to another piece of comment: your topic sentences. Don't start a new paragraph with simply a FACTUAL statement like "The Government has set up policies to..."/"HK is one of the world's largest..." Topic sentences function as the signpost of the essence of THAT particular paragraph. A reader should be able to learn about what you intend to write/express by JUST reading the topic sentence. So if I just looked at a fact/factual statement, I could never guess what your following paragraph is going to unfold, could I? that's why I suggest a much more focused discussion on the development of the film/ movie industry in HK, chronologically. Then your topic sentences could look sth like "From XX to XX, the film industry, however, experienced a revival due to the governmental support." (Helen, weakness-related, skills development, level 3)

Table 1. The two teachers' written feedback practices across two tasks

	Audrey	Helen
Total	492	858
Strength-related	20.7%	28.7%
Content level 1	11.8%	3.3%
Content level 2	0%	0.1%
Content level 3	0%	5.1%
Sub-total	11.8%	8.5%
Skills level 1	8.7%	9.2%
Skills level 2	0%	0.5%
Skills level 3	0.2%	10.5%
Sub-total	8.9%	20.2%
Weakness-related	79.3%	71.3%
Content level 1	15.5%	1%
Content level 2	5.7%	6.2%
Content level 3	0.4%	8.9%
Sub-total	21.6%	16.1%
Skills level 1	31.7%	3.4%
Skills level 2	21.1%	15.8%

Skills level 3	4.9%	36%
Sub-total	57.7%	55.2%

Table 2. Audrey's written feedback practices across tasks

	Informative	Argumentative	Overall
Total	185	307	492
Strength-related	25.94%	17.6%	20.7%
Content level 1	12.43%	11.4%	11.8%
Content level 2	0%	0%	0%
Content level 3	0%	0%	0%
Sub-total	12.43%	11.4%	11.8%
Skills level 1	13.51%	5.7%	8.7%
Skills level 2	0%	0%	0%
Skills level 3	0%	0.3%	0.2%
Sub-total	13.51%	6.2%	8.9%
Weakness-related	74.06%	82.4%	79.3%
Content level 1	16.76%	14.7%	15.5%
Content level 2	7.57%	4.5%	5.7%
Content level 3	1.08%	0%	0.4%
Sub-total	25.41%	19.2%	21.6%
Skills level 1	23.79%	36.49%	31.7%
Skills level 2	21.62%	20.85%	21.1%
Skills level 3	3.24%	5.86%	4.9%
Sub-total	48.65%	63.2%	57.7%

Table 3. Helen's written feedback practices across tasks

	Informative	Argumentative	Overall
Total	325	533	858
Strength-related	36%	24.2%	28.7%
Content level 1	1.2%	4.5%	3.3%
Content level 2	0.3%	0%	0.1%
Content level 3	4.3%	5.6%	5.1%
Sub-total	5.8%	10.1%	8.5%
Skills level 1	8%	10%	9.2%
Skills level 2	0.6%	0.4%	0.5%
Skills level 3	21.6%	3.7%	10.5%
Sub-total	30.2%	14.1%	20.2%
Weakness-related	64%	75.8%	71.3%
Content level 1	0.6%	1.3%	1%
Content level 2	4%	7.5%	6.2%
Content level 3	4.6%	11.4%	8.9%
Sub-total	9.2%	20.2%	16.1%
Skills level 1	3.4%	3.4%	3.4%
Skills level 2	10.8%	19%	15.8%
Skills level 3	40.6%	33.2%	36%
Sub-total	54.78%	55.6%	55.2%

Table 4. Aspects of performance commented on by the two teachers across tasks

	Audrey	Helen
Content	32.32%	24.5%
Organization	32.11%	29.02%
Language	26.83%	30.77%
Citation	8.74%	15.62%
Total	100%	100%

4.2 Teacher and student perceptions

Regarding the purpose of strength-related feedback, both the teachers and students acknowledged its motivating role. Both teachers provided strength-related comments on student writing (Table 1). They stated in the interviews that such comments were necessary, because they could motivate students by acknowledging their hard work or the areas in which they have performed well. For example, Audrey stated that she provided “one or two sentences of positive comments to acknowledge their hard work” and to “make them feel good”. Helen explained:

... basically, it is to make ... the students feel better ... to boost their confidence ... I have to let them know ‘you can actually do it and do it quite well in some areas’ and ... to make them feel better and at the same time if you feel better about something you will feel more comfortable when you have to improve.

The student survey shows that the students agreed (Helen’s class) or tended to agree (Audrey’s class) that “Teacher written feedback motivated me to write better” (item 2.7 in Tables 5 and 6). Student interviews further reveal that they were motivated by strength-focused feedback to put in more effort for the next assignment. For instance, T from Helen’s class mentioned: “... she gave us a lot of encouragement ... it is motivation for you to do even harder next time ...” According to Fernandez-Toro et al. (2013), strength-related feedback is usable on an emotional level, and the convergence in teacher and student perceptions suggests that both parties were aware of the emotional usability of this type of feedback.

However, there was also a slight difference in teacher and student perceptions of strength-related feedback in each class. While Audrey expected strength-related feedback to only perform a motivating role, her students stated that strength-related feedback also enabled them to maintain their existing good practices for the next assignment:

Ce: ... sometimes if she just writes down what you need to improve, yes, we can improve the part of that, but we don’t know ...

Je: What should we maintain.

Ce: And next time maybe we don’t know it is a good way to do this approach, and maybe we change another approach, and maybe it is not good enough, then not that good, ... we don’t know which is better.

Helen mentioned in the interview that she tended to explain why her students’ writing was good in particular areas (and this pattern was evident in her practice – see Table 1) so that they could also apply their existing strengths to future assignments, but none of her students interviewed raised this point. It has been suggested that strength-related feedback may be strategically usable, if teacher explains the students’ strengths (Fernandez-Toro et al., 2013) and this may empower students to use similar strategies for future assignments (Fernandez-Toro et al., 2013; Goldstein, 2004). Nevertheless, in the two teachers’ cases, only the students (i.e. Audrey’s students) or the teacher (i.e. Helen) were aware of such strategic usability.

Concerning aspects of performance commented on, teacher and student perceptions converged. The two teachers’ written feedback practices show that they commented on areas prescribed by the

assessment criteria, including content, organization, language and citation (Table 4). In the interviews the teachers acknowledged the importance of following a criterion-referenced teacher evaluation form when providing written feedback. For example, Audrey mentioned:

I divided them into organization, content, etc., and ... each paragraph I did actually gives them feedback, individual feedback ... about the elaboration, logical thinking, and the choice of sources for their writing.

The student survey indicated that the students agreed (Helen's class) or tended to agree (Audrey's class) that "Teacher written feedback on assignments indicated whether the work had met assessment criteria or not" (item 2.4 in Tables 5 and 6). Interview data also revealed that, in the students' opinion, teacher feedback was provided according to the criteria. For example, Je (from Audrey's class) commented: "... because she has separated the whole essay into very detailed part, maybe the introduction, I have a lead-in, I have a thesis statement ... then she is scoring according the I achieved this thing ...". As noted by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), for teacher feedback to help learners take action to close the gap between actual and desired performance (i.e. for it to be usable), it needs to be related to assessment criteria so that students are more likely to adopt an appropriate conception of the standards they are expected to reach (e.g. an introduction should contain a thesis statement) and to move closer towards the qualities of writing expected by their teacher. It seems that both teachers and students were aware of an important feature that contributes to the usability of teacher feedback.

When it came to whether content and skills development feedback would be more usable for the next or future task, a slight difference in teacher and student perceptions was found in Audrey's class, while convergence was identified in Helen's class. Overall, Audrey focused on content and organization most frequently when providing feedback (Table 4). Audrey considered that her content feedback was particularly important and hoped that the students could transfer it to the argumentative essay:

Especially for essay one, right? because for essay two if you make the same mistakes again, all the logical flaw, lack of sources to support your claims, I will fail you, so I have to let them know why you only get such a low mark actually for content in essay one, right?

Although 5 out of the 7 student interviewees received more feedback on content than on aspects such as organization, language or citation, only 1 out of the 7 students gave an example of how content feedback was usable in the interviews. For instance, R mentioned how she would not include commonsensical content in future essays:

... I am not sure if I wrote something that is quite common in my ... first paragraph or second paragraph, and she wrote a question in my essay, like, do you think this topic ... maybe this point is worth talking in tertiary education or what ... I feel sad ... I won't do that again.

Except R, the other students reported how they found skills development feedback usable for the next or future task. For example, they realized that they should improve APA citation style (citation), or adopt an appropriate tone for academic writing (language).

In Helen's class, there was a match between teacher and student perceptions. Helen emphasized organization and language most frequently in commenting on student writing (Table 4) and she expected her students to apply her skills development feedback to the next or future essay. She stated:

I did pay less attention on the content, actually, because it is their way of thinking, and their way of reasoning, and ... there is no right or wrong... so I paid less attention on the content, because that is something that they may not be able to carry forward because next time there would be another totally different topic, so I focused way on the organization and the language style, because these, they can apply to whatever subject or even their work later.

In the interviews, student responses related to the usability of skills development feedback predominated. For instance, S stated:

After the essay one, she gives us a long response of the essay one. That is quite useful, because not about the [content of] essay one, sometimes may be my APA style, or some grammar problem, and some structure problem I can learn or use it in my essay two.

According to Walker (2009, 2013), skills development comments may be considered to be more usable than content comments as feed forward for future assignments. The convergence between Helen's and her students' perceptions is consistent with this finding. The importance attached by Audrey to the usability of content comments as feed forward may be due to the following reasons: (1) the two academic papers were of the same topic regardless of the different task types (i.e. informative and argumentative), so content feedback is deemed to be transferrable from the first essay to the second one; and (2) unlike what may be the case in content courses in which feedback on content of one assignment may not be directly applicable to the next one (e.g. Fernandez-Toro et al., 2013; Walker, 2009; 2013), in skill-based courses like the academic writing course in the study, feedback revealing general principles of selecting content for academic writing (e.g. avoid including commonsensical ideas) may still be regarded as being applicable to future assignments.

Table 5. Responses of students from Audrey's class

Item	Mean	<i>N</i>	SD
2.4 Teacher feedback on assignments indicated whether the work had met assessment criteria or not.	4.73	15	0.704
2.6 Teacher feedback given on my work during the module helped me improve my learning of English academic writing.	4.93	15	0.594
2.7 Teacher feedback motivated me to write better.	4.80	15	0.862

Table 6. Responses of students from Helen's class

Item	Mean	<i>N</i>	SD
2.4 Teacher feedback on assignments indicated whether the work had met assessment criteria or not.	5.14	21	0.478
2.6 Teacher feedback given on my work during the module helped me improve my learning of English academic writing.	5.19	21	0.602
2.7 Teacher feedback motivated me to write better.	5.00	21	0.632

Regarding the depth of feedback, teacher and student perceptions tended to differ in Audrey's class. Audrey tended to give level 1 feedback (i.e. acknowledge a strength or weakness) most frequently across content and skills development no matter whether she commented on strengths or weaknesses of student writing. She then used level 2 feedback most frequently for student weaknesses after level 1 feedback (Table 1). Audrey assumed that her students should be able to use her feedback, because they should know the reasons for the identified strengths or weaknesses, which were mentioned in class and did not need to be repeated in her feedback. Taking as an example the feedback about missing sources (i.e. "Some of the sources are missing."), she stated:

I think they understand, right? So, this is a research paper, ... all the claims like some strong claims need actually some evidence to support, so if I point out this, where is the source, then they should understand this. I mentioned this in class already, right?

Although Audrey's students tended to agree that "Teacher written feedback given on my work during the module helped me improve my learning of English academic writing" (item 2.6, Table 5), interview data revealed a more complex picture. Some of her students did not seem to be able to understand the reasons behind some of Audrey's comments. For instance, Je reported that due to a

lack of teacher explanation, she did not know what made a good informative essay in spite of a high grade received. She used the topic sentence as an example: “I know I have topic sentence, but I don’t know why this topic sentence is good.” She also complained about a lack of explanation for teacher feedback on her content: “She just write down, ... this not makes sense, but I ... have already write down all ... believe is make sense ... I have no idea.” Another student, Cy, talked about A’s feedback on her wrong use of grammar:

Just like the secondary school, we believe that our grammar is right, and submit it for our teacher, and the teacher to improve and correct the right grammar for us, but I don’t know why we need to use this grammar, why, why, and why?

The students’ quotes show that it was not enough for them to be reminded about the strength (e.g. topic sentence) or weakness (e.g. problematic idea) of their writing (level 1 feedback) or to be given grammar correction (level 2 feedback). What they also needed was Audrey’s explanation for her feedback (level 3 feedback), especially when it came to end-of-text comments. It can be inferred that the students did not seem to think that they were able to use teacher feedback due to a lack of understanding.

Teacher and student perceptions tended to converge in Helen’s class. In general, she tended to provide level 3 feedback most frequently across content and skills development for both strength- and weakness- related comments (Table 1). She underscored the importance of an element of explanation in her feedback to enable students to transfer it to future assignments:

I always try to put myself in their shoes. If I were a student and when I was a student, what kind of feedback I would like to read. So even it is their merit, I would tell them ‘ah, you do well because you have done this and that.’ ... so that they can do it again in the future. And also the problems, so that they can ... avoid making the same mistakes again in their next piece of writing ..., so that is why I point to not just the ‘what’, but also the ‘why’.

Helen’s students agreed that “Teacher written feedback given on my work during the module helped me improve my learning of English academic writing” (item 2.6, Table 6). Interview data further revealed that her students regarded teacher explanation as necessary for future improvement. For example, T from Helen’s class mentioned:

... because my title have used some of my personal feeling, and she understand my personal feeling, but she say in our informative essay you should avoid putting ... maybe [not] ‘our domestic helper’, you should say ‘the domestic helper’, like that ... then you would base on the feedback to know how can you do better next time.

T’s words indicate that she could use Helen’s written feedback for future assignments, because Helen not only provided a suggestion to improve the writing style of the title (i.e. “the domestic helper” rather than “our domestic helper”), but also offered explanation for it (i.e. the title reflects some personal feelings and such a subjective writing style may not be appropriate for an academic essay).

As pointed out by Fernandez-Toro et al. (2013), an element of explanation is important for teacher feedback to be perceived to be usable. The perceptions of Audrey’s students as well as the convergence in Helen’s and her students’ perceptions seem to support this finding. Without explanation, students may not be able to understand teacher written feedback well enough to consider it to be usable.

5 Discussion

From a formative perspective, this study has examined (1) two L2 writing teachers’ written feedback practices and (2) teachers’ and students’ perceptions regarding the usability of teacher written feedback as well as the relationship between the two. Both teachers provided strength-related comments in addition to weakness-related ones and addressed areas of performance as prescribed by the assessment criteria. However, they differed in terms of depth of feedback. While overall Audrey tended to give level 1 feedback (and also level 2 feedback on students’ weaknesses) most frequently

Helen tended to provide level 3 feedback most frequently. The existence of strength-related comments is in line with the recommendation that encouragement should be given on students' writing (Ferris, 2014) to make it emotionally usable (Fernandez-Toro et al., 2013), and student perceptions in this study give further support to this practice. The practice of providing criterion-referenced written feedback is consistent with the suggestion that teacher feedback should be related to the assessment criteria (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The perceived existence of criterion-referenced teacher feedback on the students' part may further suggest that they were aware of the assessment criteria and were likely to use teacher feedback to improve their work based on an appropriate conception of the standards.

However, the study shows that the mere provision of criterion-referenced teacher feedback does not seem to be sufficient for teacher feedback to be perceived to be usable. Depth of teacher feedback also needs to be taken into consideration. The two teachers adopted different response styles (Anson, 1989) by providing feedback at different levels. Although Helen's feedback was somewhat lengthy, her practice seems to be more in line with the recommendation that explanation for the inappropriateness of student's response and/or appropriateness of teacher correction should accompany teacher feedback to make it more usable (Fernandez-Toro et al., 2013; Walker, 2009, 2013). Student perceptions also lend support to her practice.

Both teachers also emphasized skills development more than content. If the in-text language-focused comments were included, the percentage of skills development feedback may be even higher. This can probably be explained by the nature of the course: it was different from the sciences and technology modules in which the teachers tended to focus on the content of the assignment (e.g. Brown & Glover, 2006; Walker, 2009). Instead, somewhat similar to the language module in Fernandez-Toro et al.'s (2013) study, it was a skills-based course in which students needed to develop writing (e.g. overall structure, writing style and language accuracy) and citation skills. Therefore, it is not surprising that teacher written feedback focused more on these skills. Probably because of the same reason, the students also tended to highlight the usability of skills development comments more than content ones.

Both convergence and divergence have been identified in teacher and student perceptions. For example, in both classes, teachers and students reached a consensus regarding the emotional usability of strength-related comments and the provision of criterion-referenced teacher feedback. In Helen's class, the teachers and students also agreed on the usability of skills development comments for future assignments and the appropriate level of teacher feedback. In terms of divergence, in each class, teacher and student opinions of the strategic usability of strength-related comments differed. The students in Audrey's class also held different opinions from their teacher regarding the usability of content comments and the appropriate level of teacher feedback. When there is a match between teacher and student perceptions of the usability of teacher written feedback, it is more likely for students to utilize feedback as intended by their teacher to improve writing. However, a mismatch may represent a challenge to enhancing feedback practices and students' learning of writing. To minimize differing conceptions, "assessment dialogues" may be held between teachers and students. Assessment dialogues refer to "discussions related to the assessment process as a general concept, but not related to the specifics of subject matter or what students need to do for a particular assignment" (Carless, 2006, p. 230). In the case of this study, the students and teachers may focus on their conceptions of usable teacher feedback in the assessment dialogue. For example, they may discuss the usability of strength-related comments, that of content versus skills development comments, and the level at which teacher feedback should be set to make it more usable. Through such a dialogue, the teacher and students may make explicit their tacit assumptions that may be unknown to the other party. The teachers can then enhance their feedback practices based on the students' responses (e.g. adjusting level of feedback and making strength-related comments strategically usable with an element of explanation on Audrey's part) and the students can know better how to utilize teacher feedback to improve their writing (e.g. understanding better the usability of Audrey's content comments and the strategic usability of Helen's comments on students' strengths).

The teachers may further use assessment dialogues as an opportunity to reflect on their own feedback philosophies, which may bear on their feedback practices, as teachers' values and beliefs ultimately shape the nature of their written comments (Weaver, 2006). For example, Audrey took it for granted that her students were able to understand her feedback without an element of explanation, and she tended to provide level 1 or level 2 feedback most frequently. This shows that teachers, when providing comments, may have assumed a level of understanding that students had not yet reached (Weaver, 2006). Such an assumption indicates that Audrey seemed to conceptualize feedback as a transmission process in which students may automatically absorb and understand the meaning of her feedback messages and act on it. In contrast, Helen considered it important to explain her written feedback for her students to have a good understanding of what their strengths and weaknesses were and why, so that they could apply it to future assignments, and she tended to give level 3 feedback most frequently. She seemed to conceptualize feedback as a constructivist and student-centered process in which students can understand teacher feedback well enough to reconstruct their writing knowledge to improve future performance. Through having assessment dialogues with the students and realizing the differing perceptions they may have, the teachers may have a chance to examine their own beliefs about how feedback should best be provided as the basis for changing their feedback practices to suit their students' needs.

6 Conclusion

From a usability perspective, this paper has sought to explore two teachers' written feedback practices, teacher and student perceptions regarding the usability of teacher written feedback and the relationship between the two. Both teachers provided strength- and weakness- related comments, offered criterion-referenced feedback and focused more on skills development than content, but they differed in terms of depth of feedback. Both convergence and divergence have been identified in teacher and student perceptions of the usability of teacher written feedback. To minimize the mismatch between the two teachers' and students' perceptions, "assessment dialogues" regarding the usability of teacher feedback have been proposed to ensure that the teachers and students are on the same wavelength. In this way, both parties will be better prepared for a dialogic feedback process (Nicol, 2010) in which teachers will provide more usable feedback for students to engage with and students will have a better understanding of teacher feedback to improve their writing.

However, this study is small in scale and its conclusion can only be treated tentatively. In particular, with its focus on teacher written feedback on the final drafts of student writing, its findings cannot be overgeneralized to where teacher feedback is also provided on interim drafts. In addition, in the latter case, it seems important to investigate whether usable teacher written feedback is actually used by students as well. Nevertheless, given writing teachers' common practice of offering written feedback only on the final products of student writing (Ferris, 2014), the findings of this study still carry relevance for teachers and students in similar contexts in which the usability of teacher feedback (i.e. its potential for students to act on) serves as the precondition for students to utilize it to close the gap between current and desired performance. As usable teacher feedback may not actually be used by students, future research may explore how to support students in utilizing the usable teacher feedback they receive (Walker, 2013). Despite the limitations, this study has provided insights into an under-researched topic in L2 writing, that is, teachers' written feedback practices in relation to the concept of usability as well as student and teacher perceptions of the usability of teacher feedback, and offered relevant pedagogical implications.

Acknowledgement

The research reported here was supported by a research grant from the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong (Ref. UGC/FDS14/H08/14). The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments to help improve earlier versions of this paper. She would also like to thank the participating teachers and students for their support throughout the research process.

References

- Amrhein, H. R., & Nassaji, H. (2010). Written corrective feedback: What do students and teachers think is right and why? *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13(2), 95–127.
- Anson, C. (1989). Response styles and ways of knowing. In C. Anson (Ed.), *Writing and response*, (pp. 332–365). Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Black, P., & William, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 7–74.
- Brown, E., & Glover, C. (2006). Evaluating written feedback. In C. Bryan, & K. Clegg (Eds.), *Innovative Assessment in higher education* (pp. 81–91). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Carless, D. (2006). Differing perceptions in the feedback process. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 219–233.
- Cohen, A. D. (1987). Student processing of feedback on their compositions. *Learner Strategies in Language Learning*, 57–69.
- Diab, R. L. (2005). Teachers' and students' beliefs about responding to ESL writing: A case study. *TESL Canada Journal*, 23(1), 28–43.
- Fernández-Toro, M., Truman, M., & Walker, M. (2013). Are the principles of effective feedback transferable across disciplines? A comparative study of written assignment feedback in languages and technology. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(7), 816–830.
- Ferris, D. R. (1995). Student reactions to teacher response in multiple- draft composition classrooms. *TESOL quarterly*, 29(1), 33–53.
- Ferris, D. R. (2014). Responding to student writing: Teachers' philosophies and practices. *Assessing Writing*, 19, 6–23.
- Ferris, D. R., Pezone, S., Tade, C. R., & Tinti, S. (1997). Teacher commentary on student writing: Descriptions & implications. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 6(2), 155–182.
- Gibbs, G., & Simpson, C. (2004). Does your assessment support your students' learning? *Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1–30.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction.
- Goldstein, L. M. (2004). Questions and answers about teacher written commentary and student revision: Teachers and students working together. *Journal of second language writing*, 13(1), 63–80.
- Hedgcock, J., & Lefkowitz, N. (1994). Feedback on feedback: Assessing learner receptivity to teacher response in L2 composing. *Journal of second language writing*, 3(2), 141–163.
- Hyland, F., & Hyland, K. (2001). Sugaring the pill: Praise and criticism in written feedback. *Journal of second language writing*, 10(3), 185–212.
- Lee, I. (2007). Feedback in Hong Kong secondary writing classrooms: Assessment for learning or assessment of learning? *Assessing Writing*, 12(3), 180–198.
- Lee, I. (2008). Student reactions to teacher feedback in two Hong Kong secondary classrooms. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17(3), 144–164.
- Leki, I. (1991). The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college- level writing classes. *Foreign Language Annals*, 24(3), 203–218.
- Min, H. T. (2013). A case study of an EFL writing teacher's belief and practice about written feedback. *System*, 41(3), 625–638.
- Montgomery, J. L., & Baker, W. (2007). Teacher-written feedback: Student perceptions, teacher self-assessment, and actual teacher performance. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16(2), 82–99.
- Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), 501–517.
- Nicol, D. J., & Macfarlane- Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self- regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 199–218.
- Radecki, P. M., & Swales, J. M. (1988). ESL student reaction to written comments on their written work. *System*, 16(3), 355–365.
- Sadler, D. R. (1989) Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science*, 18, 119–144.
- Schulz, R. A. (2001). Cultural differences in student and teacher perceptions concerning the role of grammar instruction and corrective feedback: USA- Colombia. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85(2), 244–258.
- Treglia, M. O. (2008). Feedback on feedback: Exploring student responses to teachers' written commentary. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 105–137.
- Walker, M. (2009). An investigation into written comments on assignments: Do students find them usable? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(1), 67–78.

- Walker, M. (2013). Feedback and feedforward: Student responses and their implications. In S. Merry, M. Price, D. Carless & M. Taras (Eds.), *Reconceptualising feedback in higher education: Developing dialogue with students* (pp. 103–112). London: Routledge.
- Weaver, M. R. (2006). Do students value feedback? Student perceptions of tutors' written responses. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(3), 379–394.