



## **Perceptions of Students and Self- assessment of Lecturers on Written Essay Error Feedback: the Case of the University of Botswana**

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### **Abstract**

This study sought to compare the perceptions of students with the self-assessments of lecturers on written essay error feedback. Overall 153 University of Botswana students and 20 lecturers participated in this study. All the students and 12 lecturers completed different but related questionnaires with both closed and open-ended questions. Of the 153 students, 6 were interviewed; and of the 20 lecturers 8 were also interviewed to supplement the findings of the questionnaire. The findings of the study showed that the both students and lecturers appreciate the usefulness of error feedback. However, in terms of type and amount of feedback there was a difference of opinion. The lecturers claimed that they emphasized all aspects of writing particularly 'organisation' (global feedback), whereas the students thought they did not. This study recommends collaboration between lecturers, departments and students to ensure the effectiveness of giving essay writing error feedback.

### **Introduction**

Error feedback, on one hand, has been found to be useful; to help students to fix their errors; and to improve their writing (see, Ferris, 1995; Polio, Fleck & Leder, 1998; Chandler, 2003). On the other hand, some researchers have doubted its benefits (see Zamel, 1985, Cohen, 1987; Truscott, 1999). However, in reality, error feedback remains an established practice in the second language (L2) classroom, and students value it (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 1997; Leki, 1991). Students think teacher-written feedback is important as it improves their writing (Ferris 2002; Miao, Badger, Zhen, 2006).

### **Rationale and Purpose**

Much of error feedback has focused on students' self-assessment to improve their writing performance instead of on teachers' self-assessment to improve their feedback performance (Montgomery & Baker, 2007, Lee, 2003).

Moreover, researchers have advocated for more research that compares student perceptions with teacher self-assessments and actual teacher feedback (Montgomery & Baker, 2007, Goldstein, 2006). Consequently, this study builds on research that explores the relationship between students' perceptions and teacher self-assessment regarding written essay feedback. Furthermore, it compares perceptions of students and lecturers from different university faculties. Moreover, few studies have explored feedback in Botswana (Mooko, 2001, 1997). These studies have only focused on peer feedback and self-assessment of students on composition writing. Importantly, this study focuses on essay writing in general.

### **The study**

1. Do students find written feedback useful?
2. What type of written feedback are the students given?
3. Do the perceptions of students coordinate with the self-assessments of lecturers on the type of on essays?
4. Is there a relationship between perceptions of students/lecturers on written feedback and academic background?

### **Data Collection**

153 students from the CSSU (n=60), Humanities (n=42), and Social Sciences (n=51) completed a questionnaire for this study. 81.7% (n=125) of these students indicated that they were second language speakers of English; 11.8% (n=18) third language; while only 3.9% (n=6) claimed to be third language speakers. There were 64% (n=98) first year students and 36% (n=52) students from other levels of study. Of the 60 CSSU students, 67% (n=40) were enrolled in a Post First Year Advanced Writing Course where the syllabus mostly deals with essay writing, while 33% (n=20) were First Year students enrolled in a compulsory communication and study skills course. The syllabus for this course includes topics on essay writing. The rest of the students from other faculties were also First Year students who also do the compulsory course. Only CSSU students assessed the feedback given in CSSU essays, and those from other faculties assessed the feedback given in their respective faculties.

20 lecturers participated in this study. 12 of these from CSSU completed a questionnaire, and 8 were interviewed from Humanities (n=2), Education (n=4), Business (n=1) and Science (n=1). All of the lecturers were second language speakers of English. Only CSSU lecturers completed the

questionnaire because it was much more convenient for the researchers to administer the questionnaire in CSSU.

The students and the CSSU lecturers completed a questionnaire based on the instruments used by Montgomery & Baker (2007) and Cohen (1987). Both the student and lecturer questionnaires had the same format, although the wording of the questions in each questionnaire was tailored to suit the needs of each group.

The participants were also required to decide on the type (ideas/content, organisation, vocabulary, mechanics) of feedback on the students' scripts. Some of the questions required 'yes' or 'no' answers, and others were based on a Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree'. The question that required the participants to decide on the type of feedback also used a Likert scale with choices of 'None (0%)', 'Some (25%)', 'Many (50%)' and 'All (100%)'. The percentages next to the descriptors estimated the amount of feedback given. For instance, if the participants thought that all the comments on the essay were on grammatical errors they would tick under 'All (100%)'. According to Montgomery & Baker (2007:6), "Statistical advisors noted that these percentages helped to create a more uniform definition of the quantities for participants." Questionnaire data was analysed using frequencies; and lecturers and students identified and estimated the feedback they were given.

## Results

The first question explored the students' thoughts about essay writing feedback. 87.8% (n=130) agreed or strongly agreed that the feedback from their lecturers improved their essay writing skills. 98.7% (n=149) disagreed that there is no need for lecturers to give written feedback to students. See Table 1.

(Table 1 here)

The open-ended questions and the interviews also showed that students valued feedback. All the interviewed students indicated that their lecturers commented on their essay scripts. One said, *"Our lecturer marked our essays comprehensively and commented on all them. I think she is a very strict marker."* However, some students said some lecturers in other courses did not comment on their essays. One said, *"Generally lecturers give feedback*

*but some don't give it back but just put a big tick or a mark without comment."*

Students were also asked whether it was important for lecturers to comment on students' essays. They all said yes because doing so improves their performance and self-esteem in essay writing. However, one of them felt that some feedback is annoying.

The second research question investigated the opinions of the students and lecturers regarding feedback type. Table 2 shows that the type of comments on the essays varied between local and global feedback. 71.3% (n=99) of the students said zero to twenty five per cent (none to some) of the comments were on essay organization, compared to 27.4% (n=38) who thought fifty to hundred per cent (many and all) of the comments were on essay organisation. In other words, more students thought there were not many comments on essay organization. Similarly, many thought that none or some of the comments were on each of the other or remaining aspects of writing (see Table 2). These results suggest that, although the students valued feedback, they probably thought that little attention is paid to all of the above aspects of essay writing. Interestingly the rating 'some' (25 per cent) received the highest responses (see Table 2) compared to other ratings in each category of writing.

(Table 2 here)

The findings of the open-ended question showed that the students generally preferred feedback on vocabulary, grammar, critical thinking, understanding the question, paragraphing, organization, mechanics, arrangement of ideas, cohesion, introduction, body and conclusion and writing relevant answers. The preceding list contains a mixture of local and global feedback. The items above were mentioned in the interview findings.

The third question sought to find out whether the perceptions of students coordinated with the self-assessments of lecturers on the type of feedback given the students on essay writing.

All lecturers indicated that they gave written feedback and most wrote the comments on the scripts. This agrees with what the students said earlier about their lecturers writing comments on their scripts. Specifically, 91.6% (n=11) of the CSSU lecturers who completed the questionnaire either agreed or strongly agreed that their comments helped the students to improve their

essay writing skills. The same sentiments were expressed by the lecturers who were interviewed from the Humanities, Business, Science and Education Faculties. However, one lecturer cautioned that, *"It is wrong to write lots of comments on the students' scripts. It can be discouraging to students. Detailed feedback should be written separately and attached to the essay."*

None of the CSSU lecturers indicated that zero per cent or none of the comments were on each of the following: organisation, content/ideas, vocabulary, mechanics and grammar (see Table 3). In other words, they claim to always comment on these aspects. They thought that fifty per cent or more (many to all) of their comments were on organisation (58.3%, n=7), content/ideas (83.3%, n=10) and vocabulary (66.7%, n=8). See Table 3. Lecturers from Humanities, Education and Social Sciences similarly said they commented more on content although other aspects of writing were also important. One of the Education lecturers indicated that he left grammar to be corrected by the English language lecturers. These results seem to suggest that the professional training of lecturers does not really influence the perception of lecturers on the type of feedback they give. However, it seems that the perceptions of lecturers differ from those of students in that lecturers claim to pay more attention to all the aspects of writing, whereas the majority of the students thought some or all of the aspects were less emphasised.

(table 3 here)

In the open-ended question the CSSU lecturers indicated that all the aspects of writing (organization, content/ideas, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics) are important in essay writing. The students shared the same opinion. One of the lecturers said, *"Writing is holistic and all these aspects of writing are interrelated. They are all related and therefore they must all be addressed."* However, one lecturer differed by indicating that *"One is not likely to achieve the intended goal by teaching all the skills at the same time."* However, the same lecturer, at the same time, said *"Some of the skills e.g. organization involves many other skills and so requires more time."* Another lecturer also differed by saying, *"I think each skill should be taught one at a time, separately, to ease students' understanding."* These findings suggest that lecturers differ on the approach they use to teach these aspects of writing.

Some of the lecturers were not sure whether the students indeed read the comments on their essay scripts. One of the CSSU lecturers wrote, *"If they read them at all, it should help them organize their work."* Again, it seems

that the lecturers here contradict the students' claim that they always read the lecturers' comments. However, it is interesting to note that the lecturers' observation is similar to that made by Lee (2003) who indicates that "Some teachers also doubt how seriously students take teachers error feedback and how much effort they make to learn from their errors" (Lee, 2003:229).

Finally the study sought to find out if there was a relationship between perceptions of students on written feedback and academic background.

Firstly, a majority of students from different faculties agreed or strongly agreed to each of the questions that sought to find out what they thought about the feedback they get from their lecturers. Specifically, 88.3% (n=53) of CSSU students agreed or strongly agreed that their lecturer gives them written feedback, followed by 80% (n=32) Humanities and 77.5% (n=38) Social Sciences. With regard to whether the lecturers write comments on their essays, again, the majority of the students agreed or strongly agreed. 90% (n=54) CSSU, 87.5% (n=35) Humanities, and 69.4% (n=34) Social Sciences students agreed or strongly agreed that their lecturers write comments on their essays.

The students were asked to say whether they thought about or reflected on the comments their lecturers gave them. Again the difference was not that much. 94.8 (n=37) Humanities, 93.3% (n=56) CSSU, and 83.6% (n=41) Social Sciences students agreed or strongly agreed. The students were also asked whether their lecturers' comments helped them to improve their essay writing skills and 95% (n=57) CSSU, 87.2% (n=34) Humanities, 77.6% (n=39) Social Sciences agreed or strongly agreed. Finally, the students were asked whether there was no need for lecturers to give feedback to students and, again, the majority disagreed or strongly disagreed (Humanities, 100% (n=40); CSSU, 100% (n=60); and 96.1% (n=49)). Although the responses from all faculties point to the same direction, fewer Social Science students 69.4% agreed or strongly agreed that lectures write comments on their essay scripts as compared to 90% and 87.5% of CSSU and Humanities lecturers.

Secondly, the majority of the Humanities (89.2%, n=32) and Social Sciences (82%, n=41) students indicated that zero to twenty five per cent (none to some) of the lecturers' comments were on organization. Whereas only 48.1% (n=25) of CSSU and 48.5% (n=16) of Advanced Writing Students thought so too. This suggests that CSSU and Advanced Writing lecturers pay attention to organization more than the Humanities and Social Sciences lecturers do when they mark the essays. The same trend is observed with mechanics and

grammar. See Table 4. The above results seem to agree with the comments made by the Humanities, Education and Social Sciences lecturers that their main concern is with content although they do recognize the importance of the other aspects of writing.

(table 4 here)

The findings of the open-ended question show that generally students across all faculties agreed that their lecturers wrote feedback on their essays. It is important to point out, however, that one of the Education students indicated that their lecturer never comments on their scripts probably because she is lazy.

### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of UB students and lectures and to investigate the type of feedback given students. The findings suggest that students generally appreciated the feedback because it boosted their self-esteem in essay writing. The students also thought that feedback gave them the opportunity to communicate and interact with their lecturers. These findings confirm the findings by Chandler (2003) and Ferris & Roberts (2001) that students were eager to obtain feedback from their writing.

The lecturers too thought feedback helped students to fix their writing errors. A similar observation was made by Lee (2003) that teachers are aware of the importance of feedback in helping students improve their writing. However, some interesting observations are made by this study. First, not all lecturers give their students written feedback. As one student indicated, one of the lecturers does not comment on their scripts probably because she is lazy. This, to a certain extent, confirms Lee's (2003) observation that few teachers are taking action to empower students through error feedback. Secondly, some of the lecturers do not give feedback probably because they doubt if the students will read it. As already indicated, some of the lecturers were not really sure whether the students read their feedback. This might explain why some lecturers only put ticks on the students' essays without commenting on them because they think the students will not read them. Lee (2003: 229) indicates that "the fact that some students are not treating error feedback seriously may make teachers doubt the effectiveness of their existing practice". Some lecturers may be giving less feedback because, as one of them indicated, writing lots of comments on the students' scripts can be discouraging to students. A similar observation was made by Hendrickson

(1980) that teacher feedback has the potential of being destructive rather than constructive.

### ***Type of feedback***

The students valued both local and global feedback. For example, they preferred comments on issues such as grammar, mechanics, organisation, arrangement of ideas and cohesion. Both students and lecturers believed that the feedback should depend on the errors made by the students.

There seems to be a discrepancy between what the lecturers believe they do and what the students think the lecturers actually do in terms of the type of feedback. For instance, the CSSU lecturers claimed that fifty per cent or more of their comments were on organisation, content/ideas or global issues. All the Humanities, Education and Social Sciences lecturers interviewed also indicated that 100% of their comments were on content and other writing aspects. On the contrary, the majority of the students thought lecturers dealt with only zero to twenty five per cent of these global comments. It seems that the students agree with Montgomery & Baker's (2007) observation that teachers generally give little attention to global issues such as organisation. However, contrary to Montgomery & Baker's (2007) findings, the lecturers in this study think they do not necessarily spend a large amount of time on local issues such as grammar and mechanics throughout the writing process. Maybe, lecturers comment less on each of the categories because, as some of them indicated, these aspects of writing cannot be discussed in isolation because they are interrelated. They believe that they should be discussed together because writing is a holistic process.

This study also shows some inconsistency concerning the beliefs of lecturers on the approach they use to teach these aspects of writing. As already indicated, some lecturers disagree to the holistic approach of teaching these aspects of writing. One of them believed that one was not likely to achieve the intended goal by teaching all the skills at the same time. Another one thought that teaching these skills one at a time enhanced the students' understanding. These findings may suggest that lecturers do not collaboratively reflect on the feedback they give and without such collaboration they may give the students the feedback they do not need.

### ***Comparison of students and lecturer perceptions***

The findings of this study show that both students and lecturers appreciate the value of feedback although they differ in terms of the amount of



feedback given in each aspect of writing. Specifically, the students thought that the lecturers gave zero to twenty five per cent comments on all the aspects of writing, while, on the other hand the lecturers thought the opposite. These findings may suggest that the students need more help on each type of error, especially on 'organization' which received the highest number of responses from CSSU lecturers (29.8%, n=28) than other categories. It is possible that the lecturers' beliefs that these aspects of writing are interrelated and should not be discussed in isolation, has influenced the students' beliefs that the lecturers do not emphasise some of the aspects of writing. This study has also found that students claim to read the lecturers' comments on their essay while, on the contrary, lecturers doubt whether the students read their comments. This finding suggests little interaction or communication between lecturers and students in as far as essay error feedback is concerned. Of course it is evident that there is some communication to a certain extent because earlier one of the interviewed students indicated that. However, the extent to which that communication is may be investigated in future.

### ***Perceptions and background***

Finally, this study compared perceptions of students and lectures from different academic backgrounds on written feedback. A majority of the Humanities (89.2%, n=32) and Social Sciences (82%, n=41) students indicated that zero to twenty five per cent (none to some) of the lecturers' comments were on organization. Whereas, only 48.1% (n=25) of CSSU and 48.5% (n=16) of Advanced Writing Students thought so too. As already indicated, it is possible that Humanities and Social Sciences lecturers pay less attention to essay organization, as well as mechanics and grammar, than CSSU and Advanced Writing lecturers do. However, it seems that perceptions of lecturers do not really differ according to discipline because they all believe that essay writing feedback is important.

### **Limitations of the study**

Before discussing the implications of this study, it is important to outline the limitations of the study. First, the 153 students and 20 lecturers who participated in this study represent a small sample of the University of Botswana population. In addition only a small number of lecturers from the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences were interviewed. Given this, the findings of this study should be cautiously accepted. Secondly, the findings in this study are based on perceptions of students and lecturers and may not

necessarily represent classroom reality as far as essay writing error feedback is concerned.

### **Implications**

This study shows University of Botswana lecturers and students value error feedback and believe it should be used to tackle students' writing problems. As is the case with Lee (2003) concerning the need to revamp written feedback in Hong Kong schools, there is need to improve feedback practices at the University of Botswana. It seems that faculties and/or lecturers perceive error feedback differently and differ in their feedback practices.

Also, it seems that students and lecturers differ on where essay writing error feedback should be emphasised. It seems lecturers think they should pay attention to global issues whereas students think the lecturers give little feedback on 'organization'. As Lee (2003:223) suggests, "Instead of correcting all the mistakes in a piece of writing, the teacher should first agree with learners what to focus on . . .".

The study also shows some lecturers believe that feedback should be given holistically, while others believe that each aspect should be discussed one at a time. There seems to be disagreement between the lecturers regarding how their feedback practices can be standardized. Lee (2003:222) suggests that, "English teachers have to work collaboratively and discuss how best to implement selective marking in different form levels . . .".

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This study shows that students and lecturers believe that it is important to write comments or to give students feedback on the errors they make in their essays. This supports the conclusion that error feedback is an established practice in the L2 classroom (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Lee, 1997). Furthermore, this study shows that the feedback practices at the University of Botswana largely depend on the beliefs of individual lecturers, and are to a certain extent ignorant of the students' needs. Therefore, this study recommends that error feedback should be openly discussed within and across departments; and that students should be involved in feedback decision making. More research is needed to explore the lecturers' feedback practices in the classroom and to inform lecturers on the best approaches to dealing with error feedback. Furthermore, more training for lecturers is needed on effective feedback.

Table 1 Students' responses on whether they find feedback useful

Item	Strongly disagree % (n)	Disagree % (n)	Agree % (n)	Strongly agree % (n)	N
My lecturer gives us written feedback.	5.4 (8)	12.1 (18)	52.3 (78)	30.2 (45)	149
My lecturer writes comments on our essay scripts.	6.7 (10)	10.7 (16)	49.7 (74)	32.9 (49)	149
My lecturer's comments help me to improve my essay writing skills.	5.4 (8)	6.8 (10)	40.5 (60)	47.3 (70)	148
There is no need for lecturers to give written feedback to students.	82.8 (125)	15.9 (24)	0	1.3 (2)	151

Table 2 Perception of students on the type of feedback given to students

Item	None (0 per cent) % (n)	Some (25 per cent) % (n)	Many (50 per cent) % (n)	All (100 per cent) % (n)	N
Organisation	28.1 (39)	43.2(60)	18 (25)	9.4(13)	137
Content/Ideas	15.6 (22)	41.8 (59)	27 (38)	14.2	139

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Vocabulary	24.8 (34)	38 (52)	26.3 (36)	9.5 (13)	135
Mechanics	26.7 (35)	42.7 (56)	22.9 (30)	6.1 (8)	129
Grammar	21.6 (30)	37.4 (52)	28.8 (40)	10.8 (15)	137

Table 3 Perception of CSSU lecturers on the type of feedback given to students

Item	None (0 per cent) % (n)	Some (25 per cent) % (n)	Many (50 per cent) % (n)	All (100 per cent) % (n)	N
Organisation	0	41.7 (5)	25 (3)	33.3 (4)	
Content/Ideas	0	16.7 (2)	58.3 (7)	25 (3)	
Vocabulary	0	33.3 (4)	41.7 (5)	25 (3)	
Mechanics	0	58.3 (7)	25 (3)	16.7 (2)	
Grammar	0	50 (6)	33.3 (4)	16.7 (2)	

Students from different academic backgrounds

Table 4 Comparison of Students from different academic backgrounds

		CSSU % (n)	Humanities %(n)	Social Sciences % (n)	Advanced Writing % (n)
Organisation	None	13.5 (7)	35.1(13)	38(19)	15.2 (5)
	Some	34.6 (18)	54.1(19)	44(22)	33.3 (11)
	Many	28.8 (15)	10.8(4)	12(6)	27.3 (9)
	All	19.2	0 (0)	6(3)	18.2 (6)

		(10)			
Content/Ideas	None	9.3 (5)	16.2(6)	22(11)	8.8 (3)
	Some	37 (20)	51.4(19)	40(20)	44.1 (15)
	Many	24.1 (13)	32.4(12)	26(13)	20.6 (7)
	All	25.9 (14)	0(0)	12(6)	20.6 (7)
Vocabulary	None	12 (6)	25(9)	37.3(19)	10 (3)
	Some	36 (18)	38.9(14)	39.2(20)	46.7 (11)
	Many	28 (14)	33.3(12)	19.6(10)	76.7 (9)
	All	20 (10)	2.8(1)	3.9(2)	16.7 (5)
Mechanics	None	10.4 (5)	25(9)	44.7(21)	3.3 (1)
	Some	39.6 (19)	58.3(21)	34(16)	36.7 (11)
	Many	31.2 (15)	16.7(6)	19.1(9)	36.7 (11)
	All	14.6 (7)	0(0)	2.1(1)	16.7 (5)
Grammar	None	9.8 (5)	18.9(7)	35.3(18)	6.2 (2)
	Some	33.3 (17)	45.9(17)	35.3(18)	31.2 (10)
	Many	29.4 (15)	32.4(12)	25.5(13)	31.2 (10)
	All	23.5 (12)	2.7(1)	3.9(2)	25 (8)

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