

## LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER WRITTEN FEEDBACK COMMENTARY IN AN ESL WRITING CLASSROOM

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**ABSTRACT:** *The purpose of the current study is to examine Arab learners' perceptions of teacher written feedback commentary in an ESL writing classroom. This study used a Think-Aloud Protocol (TAP) to examine learners' perceptions of teacher WCF comments, involving fifteen native Arabic speaking ESL learners (11 male, 4 female) in three TAP interviews. The results of this study reveal that participants: 1) had a very high level of interest in teacher comments, 2) appreciated feedback that praised their good work, 3) complained about marginal comments that were not linked to specific errors with no line or arrow, 4) misinterpreted some teacher feedback comments.*

**KEYWORDS:** **feedback commentary, investment, praise, identity**

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### INTRODUCTION

Most research studies have focused on the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF) types on writing accuracy, and ignored the role of learners' perceptions of teacher feedback comments (e.g. marginal, end, etc). Only since the 1990's when research studies on learners' perceptions and reactions to written feedback (e.g. Ferris, 1995; Hedgecock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Leki, 1991) began to appear, has the field focused more on how learners view WCF in general. Most of these studies have focused on learners' preference of written feedback, and have rarely linked learners' perceptions and reactions to teacher feedback in specific learning contexts (Lee, 2008). Hyland and Hyland (2006) state that written feedback is influenced by personal beliefs learners bring with them into the second language (L2) classroom.

Learners' cultural backgrounds can also influence the way they perceive teacher feedback comments, and the misunderstandings of teacher comments can even be an obstacle in their learning of English (Mantle-Bromley, 1995). It is possible that English as a second language learners (ESL) may have their own set of beliefs of teacher feedback comments such as interpreting praise comments and understanding the intended meaning of marginal comments. The current study examined ESL learners' perceptions of teacher WCF. It used a research method (i.e. think aloud protocol) that allowed for a deeper and closer interaction with ESL learners who had a chance to say everything about feedback comments. Unlike surveys and experimental designs that have been used in previous studies, and that have dealt with limited and predetermined sets of variables (Ferris, 1995; Diab, 2005).

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Written corrective feedback

Feedback occurs when two parties engage in an instructional procedure in which one side is viewed as a knowledge giver and the other as a knowledge receiver of the subject matter. Han (2001) defined feedback as a two-way interdependent process, in which both parties are information providers; and negotiate a new identity. The feedback recipient can also argue his or her point of view, and may positively interact with the feedback he or she receives. In other words, teachers may also find their students' perspective and discussion of the feedback beneficial. Hattie and Timperley (2007) define feedback as information provided by an agent regarding one's performance or understanding of instructions. In other words, feedback is employed to reduce discrepancies between current understandings and performance, and an expected goal. Feedback allows for a comparison between one's actual outcome and a desired outcome based on standards of performance (Mory, 2004). Feedback occurs more often when there is a single correct form, action, or performance desired by the feedback provider. In general, the feedback provider not only is an instructor or peer, but can also be a parent, oneself, a book, and/or experience. Parent feedback on school work might also provide both information and encouragement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Written corrective feedback is intended to improve writing accuracy and is one of the essential and challenging tasks of classroom instruction. In a teaching and learning context, WCF refers to the classroom practice in which students receive corrections on their writing products. This procedure involves a teacher, students, and peers. Lalande (1982) defines written feedback as "any procedure used to inform a learner whether an instructional response is right or wrong" (p. 140). This not only means that writing knowledge flows from teachers to learners, but it also means that both parties provide knowledge. In other words, teachers might receive insightful pieces of information of one topic from the students. WCF becomes more essential when it comes to learning a second or foreign language. Providing WCF in an L2 context is essential to improving writing accuracy. The main purpose of WCF is to bring students' attention to their writing errors, and to teach the L2 language skills to the point where learners are aware of what is expected from them as writers. WCF is also used to coach learners from the margin to produce written work with minimal errors and maximum clarity. As L2 learners' errors are viewed as natural in language learning, teachers face a challenging task in improving their students' writing (Evans, et al., 2010). Written corrective feedback is used not only as a response to writing errors, but also to praise what is good in the writing (Mory, 2004; Cardelle & Corno, 1981). That is, teachers can use WCF to thank and praise their learners for good work. WCF is used to help language learners avoid errors (e.g. grammatical, syntactic, or semantic errors) and revise their own writing, and also to make teachers aware of learners' writing weaknesses. The characteristics of WCF vary noticeably in the literature. For some, WCF may take the short form of 'yes-no' answers or crosses and ticks regarding the correctness of learners' writing. Also, it can be used as an elaboration in which correct forms and other details are provided. Written corrective feedback in second language writing had not occupied much of the research until the mid-1990s. The effectiveness of written corrective feedback has been a controversial topic in second language writing since the mid-1990s. The controversy has been around the effectiveness of each type of the WCF.

**Learners' investment and identity**

Learning is viewed as a social activity in which language permeates all social relationships in a learning context. In a writing activity, learners are engaged in a relationship with a teacher that influences what writing is and how it is learned. This relationship plays an essential role in the learners' identity change. Understanding learners' perceptions becomes an asset to quality teaching. Lee (2008) believes that "it is crucial that student responses to feedback are fed back to teachers as a heuristic to help them develop reflective and effective feedback practices" (p. 145). Thus, it is essential that teachers know what their learners envision themselves putting into and from learning the L2. Norton Peirce (1995) argues that learners can be motivated in language learning, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom. Norton defines investment as "a sociological construct, and seeks to make meaningful connections between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language and their changing identities (p. 420)". Atkinson (2011) defines investment as "what the learner envisions him- or herself putting into and gaining from learning/using the L2 in particular situations" (p. 17). There is an essential relationship between investment and identity. Investment seems to attract many scholars in the field of SLA as it provides a good understanding of how language learning occurs in various complicated conditions (Haneda, 2005; McKay & Wong, 1996; Pittaway, 2004; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Norton and Toohey (2011) argue that investment "seeks to make a meaningful connection between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language, and the language practices of the classroom or community" (p. 415). Studying a second language is different from studying most other subjects, because it involves elements of another culture and educational context (Gardner, 2007). As ESL learners have various identities which can affect their investment in the English language learning, it is important to make note of how their investment is handled in classroom (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). It is important that teachers encourage learners to invest in the L2, rather than excluding them.

When ESL learners interact with the teacher feedback, they construct a new identity in that context based on the cultures of the context members (i.e. the culture of the teacher and learners). In other words, as learners interact with their English native teacher, they shift from their original identity (e.g. Arabic speaker) to a new identity (e.g. English speaker). Within the interaction, learners try to understand their relationship with whom they interact and determine their role in the interaction, and, therefore, construct their identity. Power relations by members of the target language play an important role in shaping the way language learners interact with others. The relationship between teachers and learners is a key factor in the way learners invest in the second language. In other words, the teacher role in the interaction determines if the learner is highly invested. More recent literature in critical pedagogy focuses on issues of learner identity and what learners' investment might be. Skilton-Sylvester (2002) says that understanding the learning of English requires an attention to the multiple and conflicting identities of learners which play a role in shaping the level of investment in the L2. Norton (2000) explains that learners continue to organize a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world around them. During their learning of English, ESL learners play multiple roles with multiple identities such as a language learner and a friend of the L1 culture. That is, a learner's identity can be different when interacting with his or her English native teacher compared to when he or she interacts with a classmate from the same L1 culture. Pittaway (2004) argues that learner investment changes during the interaction as it is fragile. For instance, if a learner's participation in a classroom activity goes unrealized or ignored by the

teacher, his or her investment can be trampled and, in turn, he or she may leave the task. Therefore, learners are in need for support and guidance from their teacher who is in a good position of interacting with learners.

Learners' investment in learning a second language can affect their perception of a certain learning task. Learners' perception of any learning task depends to a great extent on how much they invest in the L2 learning context. Pittaway (2004) argues that if learners believe that a classroom activity is not going to help them achieve a return on their investment, they might drop out or disengage from the activity. The same is true with teacher feedback comments. If learners are not invested in the feedback process due to poor or unclear teacher comments, they may not attend to the feedback or may misinterpret these comments.

Teachers' choice of words and comments in the interaction allows learners to shape their identity (as opposed to be ignored and excluded from the interaction). This does not mean that the teacher has to make all learners' demands and dreams come true, but it means that the teacher allows for learners' investment during their interaction with written feedback (Pittaway, 2004). ESL learners may choose not to participate in a classroom activity, not because they are not motivated, but because of low investment in the L2. This can be due to the absence of teacher encouragement and guidance in the learning, which is described by Norton as "a good return on their investment" (p. 17). She further adds that this return on investment should be equivalent to the learners' efforts in learning a second language. Understanding the investment of learners in the learning of English requires viewing the L2 context as a site of different identities (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002).

### **Learners' cultural background**

Studying a second language is different from studying most other subjects, because it involves elements of another culture (Gardner, 2007). When learners read their teacher's feedback comments, they respond to them in a way that is indicative and informative of their cultural background. For instance, some L2 learners (i.e. Arabic learners) are not familiar with some feedback comments such as '*Really!*' and '*Wait!*', and cannot understand the intended message. Therefore, those learners may perceive the feedback as confusing or unhelpful. What L2 learners bring with them from their L1 context can affect their perception of written feedback and writing in general. Thus, if teachers can critically analyze how learners respond to their comments, then they are likely to be more sensitive not only to the kinds of feedback comments they provide but also more aware of potential conflicts in the interaction.

Cultural practices relate to all habits that learners bring with them into the class such as ways of thanking, criticism, politeness, and respect. For instance, some ESL learners do not accept overt criticism commons; instead, they prefer hedged comments (Nurmukhamedov & Kim, 2010). Instead of helping learners to overcome their writing issues, some teacher feedback comments can be confusing and/or harmful. Also, learners may interpret a feedback comment such as '*Good!*' as being sarcastic; or, to mean that the teacher is minimizing their ability to write a sentence. These practices may cause misunderstandings and misinterpretation of some feedback comments. It is important to investigate the cultural factor because ESL learners may come to a writing classroom with certain beliefs that conflict with teacher goals and feedback strategies (Ferris, 2003). Language learning can be hindered if teachers do not carefully examine how different ESL learners

perceive teacher feedback (Mantle-Bromley, 1995). ESL learners' perceptions and reactions to feedback can be different for each ESL learner based on their culture. Teacher written feedback varies from one language and culture to another; and learners' perception of it also varies. It is all about their culture, what the culture allows and what the culture forbids.

L2 language learning involves learners' cultural background that can possibly affect their willingness and ability to cope with teacher feedback. Some learners may come to the classroom with a culture that forbids some actions inside the classroom. For instance, ESL learners think that they may lose marks for disagreeing with their teacher's perspectives, or arguing any feedback correction or comment with the teacher. L2 researchers and teachers complain about the fact that language learners have little appreciation for teacher feedback comments that confuses them and puts them into chaos of their thinking. L2 learners always want to see clear directive feedback that leads them to improve their writing. Mantle-Bromley (1995) argues that some L2 learners come into classrooms "with certain attitudes, beliefs, and expectations that may actually prove harmful to their success in the classroom" (p. 383). If these L1 attitudes (e.g. arguing over teacher feedback, asking for clarification, asking the teacher to read a written comment, etc) are not met in the L2 classroom, language learning in general may be affected. For instance, some L2 learners (e.g. Arabic learners) fear arguing their point of view with their teacher, thinking that they may lose marks for that. Ferris (2003) says that before writing feedback comments, she always asks "Does this student have enough background knowledge to understand my intent in this comment?" (p. 124). Learners may not have the adequate knowledge of the L2 context to comprehend certain teacher comments. Teachers should see their comments as a conversation and a dialogue with the learners, not as an occasion to correct a paper (Straub, 1996). Teachers can use their feedback comments as a communication learning channel in which the teacher can inform the learner of their performance, and praise them for their good work.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study is to provide an exploratory investigation that examined ESL Learners' perceptions of teacher feedback comments using the TAP. This qualitative methodology was used to investigate Arabic speaking learners' perception of feedback comments. The study was conducted in intermediate and advanced English writing courses at an academic English language program located at a large state university in the Northwest US. Being a native speaker of Arabic, the researcher chose Arabic speakers to examine their perception as insider of their language and culture. The sample size of the study included 15 ESL learners (11 male and 4 female), who represented the average total of 100-125 Arabic ESL learners in the language program. Three different WCF types (i.e. direct, indirect, and metalinguistic) were used in the TAP. Participants were asked to say everything they were thinking of, looking at, doing, or even feeling as they read the teacher's comments. This method helped to reveal all monologues that learners had when reading teacher's comments.

An experienced teacher from the language program was assigned as the feedback provider. The researcher collected all written assignments from the participants and then gave them to the feedback provider for feedback. Participants were asked to participate three times in the study with three different written assignments. Each interview was followed by a short follow-up interview.

This follow-up was used to give participants the opportunity to revisit their papers and add any comments. There was a high possibility that participants would not react to the feedback comments effectively if they knew what these feedback comments were in advance; therefore, the first time participants read the feedback comments was within the TAP interview. Because all participants were native Arabic speakers, they were given the choice to use their native language at any time during the interview.

The entire TAP procedure was audio and video-taped. The researcher's role here was to trigger the participant's thinking process when he or she stopped talking or reacting. The average interview time was 15-25 minutes; whereas the follow-up interview lasted 3-5 minutes. The researcher then used NVivo data analysis software, which was very helpful in coding and organizing the themes. The researcher also did not give any correct answers of the errors on participants' papers during the TAP interview.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### Genuine desire for constructive feedback

The results of this study indicate that participants had a very high level of interest in teacher comments. Almost all participants seemed genuinely appreciative of all types of comments, at least in terms of the effort and intent behind the comments if not the form, clarity, or implications of the feedback. They generally wanted to know what their teachers thought about their writing. They perceived all types of comments as tools that would point out their weaknesses and provide ways to improve their writing. They wanted to receive teacher's comments so they could determine their writing performance at the draft stage. For instance, Hani appreciated the teacher comments, saying:

It is good thing here. I like this idea of giving comments like this one. That means she read my point... because when I saw this one [teacher comment] I thought she [the teacher] became more interested in my point or in my sentence.

On the other hand, some participants were disappointed that the teacher did not provide feedback comments next to errors or about their writing in general. For instance, Zahra was disappointed that the teacher did not provide any comments next to feedback signs. She wondered "*Why he didn't mention what's the wrong in both circles?*" Bishar was also disappointed with the absence of comments. He wanted the teacher to tell him exactly why his sentence was wrong, saying "*Give me a comment.... tell me exactly what did you understand and I will explain to you.*" This indicates that participants wanted to have a voice in what was said about their writing. They could not see themselves as good writers –the new identity they were striving for. Thus, they felt they were humiliated in not having the capability or opportunity to respond to the teacher's comments. The teacher had given feedback which amounted to a judgment on their writing without any comment that could serve as an invitation to reciprocal communication. This dynamic gave the teacher a form of ultimate power in the relationship being teacher and student.

Other participants seemed to ask for more advanced type of comments that include writing performance, argument, and organization. Hani, for instance, was more specific when he reflected

on the teacher's feedback. He said that the teacher's feedback needed comments about the organization and coherence of his ideas. He also wanted the teacher to give comments in a form that would help him to understand each error. This result is backed by Mahfoodh's (2011) finding that the Arab learners of English rejected teachers' written feedback without the inclusion of reasons why such errors occurred. Hendrickson also (1980) supports the need for comments, suggesting that all corrections need marginal comments to explain why such an error has occurred in that line. A good example of that eventuality is Bishar, who invested in the writing task but felt that he did not receive a good return on his efforts to learn how to write. He had constructed his identity as an L2 writer but felt that the teacher did not accept it. However, he seemed to focus on a different level of WCF, one that includes word choice. Hani appreciated the teacher comments in general. His comment, *'It is good thing here ... That means she read my point'* reveals how Hani's concepts of power in relationships in the social world affected his interaction as an L2 learner with the teacher (i.e. the target language speaker). Teacher feedback comments seemed to him the only way he could gain back a measure of power through receiving a response to his interaction with the task. This attitude is clearly connected to power relations in the context of the writing task. Hani had constructed his new identity as an L2 writer, and was eager to know how his teacher would react to it. He wanted to gain a confirmation of the new identity. Hani said:

Because it make sense for me, because in this point I understand that she read it well, she understand it well, and she wants to fix something specifically here.

Hani was clearly happy with teacher comments which enabled him to see his identity as a good writer. Although in the literal terms of this study's methodology, he had no idea from whom he was receiving feedback, these comments reveal that Hani, in his mind, was engaging in a personal 'conversation' with an individual he conceived of in terms of the role of the teacher. He felt like he was communicating with the 'teacher' who gave him confirmation of his new identity. Since he was unable to respond to this 'teacher' through spoken channels of communication as he would be able in an actual writing class, this 'teacher' had all the power in the interaction. Therefore, Hani was hoping to interact, at least, with the teacher's comments. That is why he said that the comments indicated that his teacher had read his point of view, and that his writing made sense. This implies that he wanted to gain power through an interaction with his teacher's response to his work, which is what Norton Peirce (1995) describes as "a good return on their investment" (p. 17). In the case of WCF, learners hope to interact with teacher feedback comments to help them see how the teacher has read their writing, and to help them understand the changes needed to strengthen their writing. More importantly, teacher comments potentially include statements that confirm a learner identity as a good writer. If learners are left without confirmation of their identity, they may feel that they are positioned as poor writers.

### **Positive feedback that promotes learning**

The participants' perspectives summarized in this hypothetical quotation reveal a mixed reaction to positive and encouraging comments. In writing, praise feedback comments affirm that a learner has performed a writing task correctly. Praise comments can be expressed with many different words or phrases such as *'Good!'*, *'Interesting!'*, *'Good point!'*, or *'Yes!'* Praise comments are viewed as important because they positively affect the learners' investment in the L2. Gee (1972) concluded that praise comments caused students to write more than students who were not praised.

During the fourteen hours of recording the TAP procedure for this study, no one participant indicated that praise comments were useless or even unhelpful; on the contrary, they were all appreciated, even when praise comments appeared as a single word such as ‘*Good!*’ or ‘*Yes!*’. For instance, when Turki saw the initial comment ‘*Good title*’ at the top of his paper, he immediately responded by saying ‘*thank you*’ with a smile. Hyland and Hyland (2001) believe that praising what learners do well is important, especially for beginning writers. Praise comments varied in length and directness. Some praise comments appeared as one word such as ‘*Good!*’ or ‘*Yes!*’; whereas others were in phrases or even sentences such as ‘*Good point*’, ‘*Good title*’, ‘*Great essay*’, ‘*Good way to organize your sentence*’, ‘*Nice thesis statement*’, or ‘*This is a very cool topic!*’

Some of the comments were not specific and were jotted on the margin. These kinds of praise comments did not help learners write better. Although these comments can be viewed as hollow comments, participants seemed to perceive them as praise comments. Some of the participants’ reactions accompanied with these comments were in the form of facial expressions such as ‘*smiling*’, or in the form of verbal reactions such as saying ‘*thank you*’. (It is worth noting here that these spontaneous expressions of gratitude provide further evidence that the participants conceive of themselves as being in a conversation with the giver of the feedback.)

She didn’t say that’s ‘perfect’ or ‘good job’ or something like that. So it [praise comments] make me comfortable.

Some learners favor praise comments even though these comments are not focused and specific. Dragga (1988) argues that these unspecific praise comments should be avoided; instead, teachers need to focus and direct their feedback comments to specific places on learners’ essays. However, the data in the current study reveal a different perspective. For example, Bishar liked a teacher praise comment on the margin, ‘*Good point*’. When I asked him about his feeling when he read this comment he replied ‘[praise comments] *encourage me. Seriously, like this ‘good point’, ‘good job’ like this encourage me*’. He again read another praise comment ‘*Good!*’ written on the margin and reacted happily. He responded to that, ‘*it makes me happy*’. He seemed highly invested in the task and was willing to continue reading the teacher’s feedback. When I asked him what he thought about it, he replied:

When I see like this word, I want to keep reading and how she corrected my mistakes. So she likes some of the work I did.... when she wrote like this word, it made me or makes me to complete to continue writing and continue reading her correction.

This implies that praise comments are significant in learners’ attitudes toward their teacher’s feedback and their own writing. Gee (1972) concluded that praised students had more positive attitudes toward writing than those who were criticized or received no comments. Bishar’s response also implies that he felt he had some power over who he was during the learning task, and that he had a voice in constructing his new identity as an L2 writer.

### **Placement of comments and relating them to errors**

Another aspect of learners’ perceptions of teacher comments concerns the types of feedback comments given as WCF for this study and their relation to specific errors. Feedback comments in the current study appeared almost everywhere including in the margins, initially, between-lines,



and at the end. Normally, marginal comments relate to written words, phrases, or sentences; whereas initial and end comments provided a general view of the entire paper. Participants varied regarding the types of comments (e.g. question, command, etc) they wished to see on their papers. For instance, Bishar responded to an end comment that accused him of plagiarism by saying that he would tear up the paper if such an accusation had appeared at the beginning of the paper. Other participants complained about comments written on the margin with no line or arrow that related them to specific errors or sentences, i.e, when the teacher wrote a marginal, initial, or end comment without linking it to the target error. Problems may even occur when a praise comment like ‘*Good point*’ is not written next to the point being praised. That is, the learner may relate it to the incorrect sentence. In this case, not only would the learner miss the correct sentence but he or she would associate praise with the incorrect sentence, possibly even misconstruing an error as being correct. Some comments were written between lines, which made it difficult for participants to relate the comment to the sentence above or below it. This ambiguity was more difficult to decipher when the comments asked for clarification using words or phrases such as ‘*give example*’, ‘*cite*’, or ‘*it is unclear*’. This type of comment makes the learner’s attempts at correction a guessing game. For instance, Safa found it very difficult to relate ‘*They did?!*’ to a specific error in the paragraph. She was confused whether ‘*they*’ referred to ‘*researchers*’ or to ‘*the government*’. This supports the claims by Zamel (1985) and Semke (1984) that teacher feedback comments can be misleading, and provide confusion to ESL learners. Zahra was also confused about one of her teacher’s comments. She could not relate the comment ‘*Source!*’ to a specific sentence in the paragraph. In another place, Zahra again failed to relate ‘*For those*’ to the line above or below the comment. Although the meaning of the comment ‘*Citation?*’ itself was clear for him, Alanizi was also confused and could not relate it to a specific sentence or paragraph. When they could not interpret comments to specific features in the text, these participants felt they did not have a voice in what was said and could not respond to the teacher’s comments. Norton Peirce (1995) argues that “What is considered appropriate usage is not self-evident but must be understood with reference to relations of power between interlocutors” (p, 19). Learners have the right to participate in the interaction and to construct their identity as language learners. They have to be granted a role in the interaction, and support their interests in the context; teacher comments which cannot be linked to that (in the text) which triggered the comment make interaction impossible.

Although participants appeared to understand some comments, they failed to incorporate changes correctly. For instance, Safa understood the comment, ‘*They did?!*’ but could not link it to a specific error in the paragraph. She was confused whether ‘*they*’ referred to ‘*researchers*’ or to ‘*the government*’. Ferris (1997) argues that students understand what comments are but are less clear about how to do the correction. Aziz, for instance, knew what the teacher comment, ‘*Are you using an electronic dictionary??*’ meant, but could not link it to a specific word or sentence. He had tried to guess the error but was not sure. In the context of this study, he did not have the chance to communicate with the teacher which would have enabled him to ask for clarification. In other words, the teacher had the power and the final word on his writing. Therefore, Aziz, who was highly invested in the task, could not respond. He said, ‘*It is not clear this way*’, and added ‘*I prefer the teacher to draw a line between the unclear sentence to his marginal comment*’. He again understood what the initial comment ‘*Define??*’ meant out of context, but failed to relate it to a specific word or phrase. He said ‘*this comment is not clear and I don’t know to which sentence it refers*’. It was clear that he was struggling to link the teacher’s comments to his own errors. This

indicates that not all comments were helpful. Bishar also could understand the between-lines teacher comment '*More details*', but found it difficult to link it to a specific error. He said '*Okay, more details. Where?*'. He was asking, '*Where?*' as if the feedback provider was present with him, reinforcing the conclusion that he saw the interaction as analogous to a conversation with a writing teacher. Bishar was resisting the idea, which he inferred from the comment, i.e, that he was in the role of a poor learner whose language level did not enable him to understand teacher comments; rather, he was asserting his identity as a competent language learner who has adequate knowledge and ability to speak a second language. That is, it seemed that the unlinked and therefore ambiguous teacher feedback comments indicated that the teacher was attempting to hold all the power in the context of the communication. In a case like this, learners may use a random guess to relate the teacher feedback comment to the error; however, there is a possibility that they may relate the teacher feedback comment to the wrong error, and the teacher's comment then becomes useless. Thus, in this instance the teacher feedback comment might have created confusion. For ESL learners, teacher feedback comments imply that learners will know what and how each writing error was made, and that their writing will improve. However, the participants in this study seemed to see the situation, otherwise. Instead of helping learners and creating an effective interaction in which learners could construct their identity as good writers, the teacher feedback comment in the above case created a site of struggle for the learner. Participants could not see themselves as L2 writers because they could not gain a measure of power in the context. They felt that their teacher had taken over their voices, and that their teacher's comments were not sufficient to confirm their new identity.

### **Interpreting the meaning of comments**

Interpreting teacher's comments is considered the most problematic issue in writing classrooms. Teacher comments can take several forms including, a question, an imperative, and an affirmative statement. However, the current study revealed many misinterpretations of these types of comments. Ferris (1997) states that teacher comments remain the most common form of response to student writing, and that there is no one-size-fits-all form. This means that teachers need to weigh their choices when writing comments on their learners' papers. Searle and Dillon (1980) speculated what interpretation students put on their teacher feedback comments. The results of this study show a number of misinterpretations of teacher comments. For instance, Om-Azooz misinterpreted the comment '*Really?*' to mean that the sentence was unclear and needed explanation. Turki also misinterpreted the teacher's comment '*Wait! Really??*', but in a quite different way. He replied to this comment by saying '*The teacher is very mean!*', thinking that the teacher did not agree with him. Saad also perceived the comment '*Really?!*' as provocative. This negative meaning is synonymous with an equivalent expression in the participants' mother tongue. These misinterpretations relate to Zamel's (1985) argument that confusion surrounding teacher comments can be attributed to the vague and contradictory nature of teachers' comments on writing content, and the types of comments teachers use to correct certain errors.

### **Rejecting the 'cheater' label**

The category of reactions described by the statement above focuses on the very narrow, yet complex issue of whether the writer has given proper credit to words or ideas borrowed from another source. The standards of what is acceptable were unfamiliar and sometimes counterintuitive for the participants in this study; moreover, even the implication of impropriety

expressed in WCF, can provoke a strong reaction, as it directly and negatively affects these learners' emerging identities as good writers. When learners come to the classroom, they always seek to create new identities out of their interactions with their teachers. This new identity is negotiated with the teacher in the learning context. That is, each learner comes to the classroom with a different identity. For instance, some learners join ESL classes as mothers, fathers, teachers, or professionals, but each of them expects to construct a new identity as a language learner. These learners want to share in an equal power relationship with their teacher. They expect their teacher to confirm this new identity during learning activities. Teacher feedback is a social action, taking place within a proscribed relationship between teacher and student (Straub, 1997). If learners do not receive confirmation of their new identities, or are labeled with an identity that they do not like, they become disappointed, discouraged, and less motivated to learn. As a result, they may leave the learning activity. For example, when Aziz perceived an accusation of plagiarism in the feedback in the TAP interview, he got angry and rejected the new identity of 'cheater' that he felt his teacher had framed for him.

Some participants misinterpreted comments that intended to instruct them in giving proper credit and perceived them as accusations of plagiarism. Participants' reactions were negative; one of them even said clearly that if such a comment appeared at the beginning of the paper, he would tear up the paper. One of the teacher's comments on Bishar's paper read, *'Again, please, show your sources to your teacher! You need to show that you are paraphrasing'*, Bishar interpreted this comment as an accusation of plagiarism and said *'I don't accept it'*. Although the teacher comment did not necessarily mean *'plagiarism'*, Bishar considered it to be. He felt that the teacher had labeled him with that title, which clearly annoyed him, and therefore made him angry. This suggests that when teachers give any sign of plagiarism such as feedback comments, learners instantly think of the cheater identity, which they vehemently reject. Learners are invested in the task and expect to negotiate an identity with their teacher; an identity that is reflective of their efforts in the task. In the context of learners' interactions with their teachers, the learning environment, not only a site for exchanging information, but is also a site for making sense of who they, the learners, are and how they relate to other individuals in the context (Norton Peirce, 1995). Bishar rejected this new identity as a cheater. He had invested in the learning task with the expectation of assuming equal power in the interaction, but realized that it was his teacher who had the power and voice to label him. Such a comment may affect the learner's investment in the L2 learning process. Bishar again interpreted the end-comment *'please, check with your teacher to avoid plagiarism!!!'* as an accusation of plagiarism. He was clearly angry, and his responses showed that he was trying to prove that he had not plagiarized on this occasion and did not plagiarize in general. He refused to assume the identity -being a cheater- that his teacher assigned him. Therefore, he felt that his investment in the L2 interaction was not appreciated, which prompted his comments, *'there is no one respect the time that I worked [on the assignment]'* and *'it is unprofessional way to tell you to avoid it, to show you that she think there is some sentences are not mine.... it's destroying me seriously'*. This supports the argument made by Norton Peirce (1995) that language learners "expect or hope to have a good return on that investment -a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources". Peirce further adds that the teacher's response to learners' investment "must be seen as commensurate with the effort expended on learning the second language" (p. 17). Norton and Gao (2008) also refer to such exchanges as "power imbalances between teachers and students" (p. 118). In other words, the teacher comment,

if not well-thought out, might also jeopardize the teacher-student relationship by causing the loss of students' trust and confidence.

According to the personal experience of the researcher, Arabic speakers tend to go beyond the literal meaning of sentences and make their own judgment of what teacher feedback comment implies. From this perspective, Aziz went beyond what the teacher comment implied. He perceived the teacher's comment '*Are these your own words?*' as labeling him with the identity –cheater- which he too rejected. He felt powerless in the interaction, because the teacher had the only voice in creating his own identity. He wanted to be part of the construction of his own identity. Zahra also perceived one marginal comment, '*Source!*' as an accusation of plagiarism. She said that this comment made her angry. She may have felt that the teacher did not believe that a certain sentence belonged to her and that is why he asked for the source.

From a personal teaching experience in an Arabic L1 educational system, Arabic learners have a different perception of what plagiarism is. They think that some facts and ideas cannot be claimed as property by the original author, and that they, the L2 writers, need not cite every idea. They perceive all ideas and facts as universal, which means that everybody agrees on them. Therefore, when they were asked to cite one idea, they thought that they did not have to cite what they believed in. For instance, Rehab thought that the comment '*On the other hand, there are diabolical brokers that exploit their needs for immoral trading*' did not have to be cited because she thought anyone can say this statement, and that all people know that. Arabic learners think that they need to cite only the ideas that are invented or mentioned by only one person or certain people. Even when learners do plagiarize they do not feel comfortable with being labeled as cheaters. They expect the teacher to justify the need to give credit but not to label them with such a negative identity. Rihab also did not accept the teacher's marginal comment '*Plagiarism*', and considered it as an explicit accusation. Aziz also was very frustrated that the teacher explicitly accused him of plagiarism. The teacher comment read '*Are these your own words?*'. He said '*The teacher comment means that he [the person receiving the comment] always cheats and copy others' work*'. As a result, learning interaction in the context becomes the site of real struggle, because there is a conflict between what the learner views as normal (i.e. using others' information or findings) and what the teacher considers to be pretending another writer's words or ideas are those of the L2 writer. In general, learners will always reject an identity that is not negotiated, and that is created by only the teacher; moreover, they will strenuously object to being given an identity as negative as plagiarizer.

Another reason for rejecting the teacher's accusation of plagiarism is cultural background. From the perspective of Arabic culture, any personal accusation is an insult, especially an explicit accusation (as opposed to implicit). Arabic learners normally want to be confronted and shown exactly what parts of their work is plagiarized. They always want to be given a chance to defend themselves. For instance, Bishar when responding to teacher accusation of plagiarism, '*Prove it. Can you prove it? How do you know?*'. He felt very disappointed that the teacher labeled him with that stigmatizing identity, without the teacher even presenting him or herself so that Bishar could defend himself.

## **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The results of this study were analyzed and interpreted with respect to three constructs within the context of L2 writing classes and ESL learning in general. These include *identity change*, specifically the growth and development of the learner's identity as an L2 writer; the *power relationship* between teacher and student, specifically the degree to which the learner feels either controlled or powerless in the writing process; and *investment*, specifically the extent to which the learner feels that the time and effort put into the task have been worthwhile and become therefore highly invested to continue the effort.

The feedback prompting such reactions included the following: 1) comments not clearly linked to specific errors or issues, 2) teacher comments in general that seemed to be disrespectful of the learner's effort. Together, these participant responses reflect the participants' strong investment in the task, coupled with equally intense dissatisfaction with what the participants perceived as indications that the instructor had the power to judge them as deficient while they had no recourse to explain or defend themselves. Participants react defensively to any feedback comments which they perceive as tending to strip away that identity; especially revealing was the vehemence with which some participants responded to what they perceived as the most serious challenge to their identity, the suggestion of plagiarism. More than any other single set of comments, these reactions support the finding that emerging identities and issues of investment in the task were operating in the context of this study.

### **Pedagogical implications**

It would be risky to generalize the results of the current study to any divergent group of ESL learners. The data was based on a small sample, and moreover, considered only a single context with a non-representative group of speakers of a single L1. However, a number of important pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study and applied to similar contexts.

Participants reported that teacher comments focused more on grammatical errors than on broader issues, such as clarity of writing, organization of ideas, types and quality of support for assertions, etc. Zamel (1985), similarly, criticized teachers for paying excessive attention to grammatical errors. In this study, participants' responses showed that they wanted more attention on other aspects of writing such as coherence, organization, and meaning. Teachers should provide unambiguous and well-written comments that relate to specific errors. Teachers should avoid writing marginal comments that are not linked to specific errors; they should not assume students will be able to relate these comments to the errors. In addition, teacher comments should carry a clear message. Learners seemed to misinterpret comments with multiple meanings. The results of this study also show that participants value teacher praise comments in feedback, and were able to recall many of the specific praise comments made on their papers. Therefore, teachers should use praise comments to encourage learners.

## **CONCLUSION**

The current study has provided a descriptive account of ESL learners' perceptions toward teacher feedback comments. The predominant result of this analysis is that most of the 15 participants in

this study showed a great interest in teacher feedback comments. However, they were frequently confused or frustrated by some teacher comments on their papers. This confusion stemmed from unclear comments, uncertainty regarding the error to which comments referred, and misinterpretation of comments. Many participants did not understand comments while others misinterpreted them.

Some participants found it difficult to relate comments to the targeted errors because the teacher did not use lines or arrows to show which sentence the comment related to. Furthermore, participants misinterpreted comments that are ambiguous and carry multiple messages. The results suggest that teachers should think critically about their comments, and consider ways to make them clearer and easier to understand. The data recorded in this study reveal another kind of misinterpretation, one that tended to create offense. Participants interpreted some comments as accusations of plagiarism. This may have resulted from the indirectness of the participants' L1 and culture, leading the participants to misinterpret such comments. When teachers correct papers, they should, when possible, choose from tried and tested words, phrases, and statements related to the context and goals of the course.

Praise commentary was essential for learners to attend their teacher feedback in general and feedback comment in particular. Overall, participants appreciated praise comments. This suggests the great potential for positive impact that such comments might have in aiding the teacher's effort to provide constructive WCF. Participants wanted and even asked to receive praise comments on successful parts of their written work, which they presumably viewed as encouragement or a 'pat-on-the-back'. The participants wanted to know what they had done well, not just an indication of their errors. Teachers need to inform ESL learners when the learners have begun to master a writing skill and should note improvements.

The overall results from this study regarding feedback comments suggest that teachers need to consider how their comments are perceived. How comments are presented has a significant effect on the relationship between teachers and their learners, affecting the learners' emerging identities as L2 writers, the power dynamics in the teacher-student relationship, and ultimately, the motivation of the learners to continue developing as L2 learners and writers. The results of this study also suggest that teachers should be aware of how their learners view themselves in the learning interaction. ESL learners are more likely to interact in the learning task when the teacher is supportive; and when the teacher accepts the learners' new identity as an L2 user. During the learning interaction, if learners are viewed and are encouraged to view themselves as poor writers, their perceptions may negatively affect their investment in the writing task, specifically, and the ESL learning process, in general. Teachers are highly encouraged to support their learners with targeted positive encouragement and feedback during the writing task, and view them as good writers, given that learners are sensitive to teacher attitudes and perceptions even through the filter of a second language.

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