

## Malaysian ESL Teachers' Practice of Written Feedback on Students' Writing

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### ABSTRACT

Feedback to students' writing plays an important role as a scaffolding technique to help the students to improve their writing skills. With the introduction of school-based assessment and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) into the new Standards-based English Language Curriculum (SBELC), teachers are expected to adapt the process writing approach in their classroom, where feedback is at the core of the process writing approach. This present study aims to explore Malaysian ESL teachers' practice of written feedback in their writing classrooms. Two sample essays were used in this study. The sample essays were written by a Form Three student of a secondary school in Kuantan, Pahang, and a Form Five student from a secondary school in Manjung, Perak. The sample essays were sent to all secondary schools in Pahang, and teachers who teach the English Language at the schools were asked to mark the essay as how they would normally mark their students' essays. The participants of this study were selected using purposive sampling. A total of 89 student

sample essays with the teachers' marking were returned, and the teachers' feedback were analysed. This study found that most of the participants mark their students' essays comprehensively and implicitly. However, some of the respondents did not give any feedback at all, and even if they did, the feedback would be retracted from the marking rubric. It has also been found that the respondents of this present study did not utilise comments on goals to work towards or specific activities for improvement. This

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paper further discusses the findings in view of the assessment of learning (AfL) and gives recommendations for future practice.

*Keywords:* ESL writing, teaching writing, writing assessment, written corrective feedback

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## INTRODUCTION

Within ESL classrooms, teachers' written corrective feedback has always been under scrutiny by academics, as an inconclusive debate is still going on since the publication of Truscott (1996) that sparked the debate. Teachers and researchers have been studying all aspects of teachers' feedback to students' writings since then. However, the results are still inadequate as to whether such practice could help students develop their writing. Realising this, future research on teachers' feedback needs to move from whether it is effective to focus on what type of feedback is effective (Shelly, 2014). Moreover, teachers need to be innovative in providing feedback to students' writings (Lee, 2014).

The teaching of writing within Malaysian ESL classrooms is governed by the curriculum specifications and syllabuses set by the Malaysian Ministry of Education. The Education Ministry advocates the process writing approach; thus, as stipulated in the English Language curriculum, the learning outcomes match the process writing approach (Abdullah & Sidek, 2012).

With the introduction of school-based assessment (SBA) and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the new Standards-based English Language

Curriculum (SBELC) has been developed to align the pedagogies in Malaysian schools to that of CEFR (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017a). For example, under the new SBELC, students are expected to "produce a plan or a draft of two paragraphs or more and modify this appropriately either in response to feedback or independently" (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2017b, p. 38). That is in line with the process writing approach, which is embedded within the formative assessment.

The same element, process writing, has also been highlighted in the Curriculum Specifications for English Language Form 4, where teachers need to apply process writing skills, which include "making an outline, ... writing out 1<sup>st</sup> draft, revising and editing the draft..., rewriting 2<sup>nd</sup> draft, proof-reading draft, ... and writing out the final draft" (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 18).

However, a study done by Maarof et al. (2011) has found that students are not allowed to revise their essays, as the teachers have not utilised the process writing approach. The study was done in five secondary schools in southern Malaysia, where 150 Form Five students answered a survey on students' perceptions of teacher and peer feedback in enhancing ESL students' writing. Maarof et al. (2011) mentioned that students do not produce multiple drafts of their essays "because of time constraints, the large number of students in a classroom, absence of the practice of process writing and students' lack of motivation." (p. 29). Further to this,

Nesamalar et al. (2001) claim that Malaysian students have writing skills deficiencies.

In a study done by Gurnam et al. (2011), it has been found that only 68% of the students received feedback immediately after each assessment. This finding indicates that the conception of formative assessment that the Ministry of Education champions is not being practised in schools.

There has been no study done on teacher practice of written feedback within Malaysian ESL classrooms. Previous studies have not looked into teachers' practices in providing feedback to students' writings. It is imperative to align teachers' practices to the formative assessment framework that is part of the school-based assessment that has been introduced in the national curriculum. The objective of this study is to find out the practices of written feedback of English Language teachers in Pahang in their writing classroom, and more specifically, this study tries to answer the research question "What is ESL teachers' current practice of written feedback in the writing classroom?"

### **Feedback in ESL Writing Classroom**

According to Ramaprasad (1983, p. 4), feedback is "the information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way." Given the definition, feedback could come in two forms: corrective feedback and general comments about the work.

Hyland and Hyland (2006) claimed that feedback in an ESL writing classroom functions in two ways, firstly, as a key

element of the students' growing control over writing skills, and secondly, as teachers' scaffolding technique. Summative feedback, designed to evaluate writing as a product, is generally replaced with formative feedback, which helps students develop their writing skills. The process approach in providing feedback to students' writing, that is formative feedback, encourages teachers to support students' development in writing through multiple drafts by providing feedback during the writing process itself, rather than at the end of the writing process.

According to Hyland and Hyland (2006), feedback in ESL writing classroom could be divided into:

1. Written feedback
2. Teacher-student conference
3. Peer feedback and
4. Computer-mediated feedback

### **Written Feedback in the ESL Classroom**

Feedback on students' writing is a critical, non-negotiable aspect of writing instruction, in which teachers help students shape their composition and writing skills (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). Research on teacher feedback has been done extensively; nonetheless, the result is somewhat inconclusive (Ferris, 2012). The argument on the effectiveness of feedback to students' writing started with a paper by Truscott (1996), where it was argued that previous research failed to show positive results of teachers' written feedback to students' writing development. Truscott further argued that such practice is harmful because

it takes energy and attention away from more pressing issues, such as developing students' ideas in writing courses. Finally, by supporting Krashen's Monitor Hypotheses, Truscott claimed that comprehensible input is sufficient for L2 acquisition. Students should be exposed to extensive experience with the target language through various reading and writing exercises.

The first response to Truscott (1996) was written by Ferris (1999) where she claimed that corrective feedback does help in language learning. Ferris' challenge led to more research done in the area up until today. Chandler (2003), one of the important studies, found that the grammar accuracy of students who received corrective feedback improved in L2 over time compared to the control group who did not receive any corrective feedback.

In studying the effectiveness of corrective feedback of different types, Bitchener (2008), in a two-month study, found that students who received corrective feedback of any type performed better compared to those who did not receive any corrective feedback. Furthermore, a further study on the same participants showed that the treatment group who received corrective feedback improved their writing accuracy. Thus, it clearly shows the positive effects of corrective feedback.

One of the most common types of written feedback is corrective feedback. Lee (2005) explains four written corrective feedback methods, divided into two categories: Comprehensive vs Selective and Explicit

vs Implicit. Although providing correct grammatical errors is one of the most popular techniques among many language teachers, various types of corrective feedback have been recommended as it is considered more effective and successful than simply relying on a single method (Corpuz, 2011).

The comprehensive written corrective feedback approach is made when the teacher corrects all students' writing errors, irrespective of their error category. Comprehensive written corrective feedback could help students notice errors made and new features of the target language as postulated in Krashen (1992) Noticing Hypothesis. By noticing, effective language learning could be promoted. Nevertheless, Ellis et al. (2006) claimed that given the limited capacity of students processing ability, students might be overwhelmed; thus, comprehensive written corrective feedback may not be as effective as it should be.

On the other hand, the selective written corrective feedback approach targets specific grammatical errors only, leaving all other errors uncorrected. Ellis (2009) claimed that selective written corrective feedback might be more effective than comprehensive written corrective feedback as students can examine multiple corrections of a single error. Thus, students obtain a richer understanding of what is wrong in their writing and opportunities to acquire the correct form.

Explicit written corrective feedback is the type of feedback where the L2 teacher

directly provides the correct forms or structures to show explicitly the error in the students' writing. In the research done by Ellis et al. (2006), it is found that explicit written corrective feedback is more effective for treating errors in verb tenses.

Implicit written corrective feedback is where the teacher shows that an error is made by underlining, marginal description, circling or correction codes. Correction codes implicitly provide corrections using symbols and abbreviations to inform students of an error and the kind of error made. Lee (1997) found that students favour implicit written corrective feedback compared to explicit written corrective feedback. In earlier research by Lalande (1982), participants showed a reduction of errors in writing when implicit written corrective feedback is used.

Over the years, improvement-oriented feedback has emerged and is said to be more favourable than the achievement-oriented feedback. According to Dinnen and Collopy (2009), achievement-oriented feedback would give suggestions on improving the students' work, as compared to achievement-oriented feedback, where the emphasis is given on whether the work has achieved the desired standards. Cho et al. (2006), in a research done on perceived usefulness of comments, found that improvement-oriented feedback to be more effective. In a more recent study, Wu and Schunn (2020) found that students would respond to feedback that offered specific revisions recommendations and often better understood the problem that occurred in their work.

## METHODOLOGY

For this study, the case study approach was used. Case study offers insight into regularities or recognisable patterns of the unique individual, or group of people, that could be used in understanding the phenomenon more accurately (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010). The objective of this study is to find out the practices of written feedback of English Language teachers in Pahang in their writing classroom, and more specifically, this study tries to answer the research question "What is ESL teachers' current practice of written feedback in writing classroom?"

Two sample essays were used for data collection. A Form 3 student from a secondary school in Kuantan, Pahang, wrote the first sample essay. The student was said to be an average student, where he would normally score a B or C in his English Language tests and exams. However, later in the same year, this student sat for PT3 and scored a B when this study took place. The writing task was taken from a module for PT3, which was developed by Hamidi (2015). The writing task is on recount where it follows the format as stipulated in PT3. In the task, students were asked to write a letter to a friend about the incident that happened during his/her birthday party. In the task, salutation, the first paragraph and the last paragraph are given. The sample consists of 143 words, written in two paragraphs.

The second student sample essay was written by a Form 5 student from a secondary school in Manjung, Perak. The student attended a tuition class held by the

author of the module (Kamaruddin, 2016). The student was said to be an average student where she would normally score B in her English Language tests and exams. However, in the same year, this study was held, the student sat for her SPM and scored B+ for English Language. The task of the essay was postulated by Kamaruddin (2016). The question follows the format of Section B, Paper 1 SPM, asking students to respond to several options in continuous writing. For this study, the student wrote an essay entitled “The Most Embarrassing Moment of My Life.” The essay consists of 396 words, written in seven paragraphs. In order to retain the authenticity of both samples, photocopied copies of the students’ handwritten essays were used. Respondents of this study were expected to give feedback to the essay in written form.

The respondents of this study consist of English Language teachers who teach in Pahang. They were selected using a purposive sampling method. Teachers who teach English Language in secondary schools in the state of Pahang were approached and asked to participate voluntarily in this study. A cover letter explaining the study’s objectives was sent together with the sample essays and the consent form to be signed by the participants should they agree to participate in this study.

A total of 89 sample essays were returned to the researcher. Out of which, 42 essays were PT3, and 47 essays were SPM essays. From Table 1 and Table 2 below, the majority of the teachers who participated

in this study were Language Teachers (62 teachers), and this was followed by Heads of Panel (14 teachers). Interestingly, there were six non-optionist teachers participated in this study. Generally, non-optionist teachers are not trained to be English Language teachers, but they were trained to teach other subjects. Schools with an insufficient number of English Language teachers often assign teachers of other subjects to teach English. It is also common for other subjects. Out of the 89 participants, 43 teachers teach at rural area schools, while there were 46 participants from urban schools. From the demographic data collected, about 72% (n = 64) of the participants teach at *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan* (SMK–National Secondary School), 14 teachers were from *Sekolah Berasrama Penuh* (SBP–Boarding Schools), followed by eight teachers from *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama* (SMKA–Islamic National Secondary School), and three teachers from *Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan* (SMJK–National Type Secondary School). Most of the participants had four to five years of pre-service training, with about 43% (n = 38), while the majority had been teaching between five to nine years (24.7%, n= 22). Out of the 89 participants who participated in this study, only 11 teachers have master’s degrees. Most of the participants are females (n = 75), and only 14 teachers are males.

Although the respondents were not marking their own students’ essays, they have been reminded to mark the sample essays like they would normally do in their

Table 1

*Profile of the Participants (PT3)*

Role	School location	School category	Pre-service training (year)	Teaching experience (year)	Education level	Sex
Head of Department: 1	Rural = 22 Urban = 20	SBP: 7 SMJK : 2 SMK: 29 SMKA: 4	0 – 1: 12 2 – 3: 8 4 - 5: 17 ≥ 6: 5	0 – 4: 9 5 – 9: 7 10 – 14: 5 15 – 19: 8 20 – 24: 8 25 – 29: 1 ≥ 30: 4	Bachelor's degree: 38 Master's degree: 4	Female: 32 Male: 10
Head of Panel: 4						
Language Teacher: 31						
Media Teacher: 1						
Non-optionist: 3						
Senior Assistant: 2						

\*SBP = *Sekolah Berasrama Penuh* (Boarding School), SMJK = *Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan* (National Type Secondary School), SMK = *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan* (National Secondary School), SMKA = *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama* (Islamic National Secondary School)

Table 2

*Profile of the Participants (SPM)*

Role	School location	School category	Pre-service training (year)	Teaching experience (year)	Education level	Sex
Head of Department: 3	Rural = 21 Urban = 26	SBP: 7 SMJK : 1 SMK: 35 SMKA: 4	0 – 1: 5 2 – 3: 9 4 – 5: 21 ≥ 6: 12	0 – 4: 7 5 – 9: 15 10 – 14: 7 15 – 19: 10 20 – 24: 3 25 – 29: 4 ≥ 30: 1	Bachelor's degree: 40 Master's degree: 7	Female: 43 Male: 4
Head of Panel: 10						
Language Teacher: 31						
Non-optionist: 3						

\*SBP = *Sekolah Berasrama Penuh* (Boarding School), SMJK = *Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan* (National Type Secondary School), SMK = *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan* (National Secondary School), SMKA = *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama* (Islamic National Secondary School)

classrooms as if they are marking their students' essays. Moreover, the same essays were used in this study so that the feedback given by the teachers are comparable, as opposed to if they were to mark different essays. Finally, the original handwriting of the students was also retained to ensure the authenticity of the sample essays. Thus, it is in line with the design of a case study.

### **Data Analysis**

For data analysis of the students' sample essay, teachers' responses to the sample were analysed in two stages: written corrective feedback and written feedback or comments.

In analysing the teachers' written corrective feedback on the sample essay, their written corrective feedback was first categorised. According to Lee (1997), teachers' written corrective feedback could be categorised into four main groups, which are 1) Selective, 2) Comprehensive, 3) Direct, and 4) Indirect. Furthermore, all these four groups could be overlapping, where a teacher's marking could be selective and indirect when the teacher chooses certain features of language that he/she wants to mark. For example, the teacher can put a symbol on the error or at the right margin of the paper without giving any correct answer.

In the second stage, teachers' comments and remarks were analysed using a checklist that was developed for this study. The list was adapted from several earlier works by Wiliam by Nyquist (2003), Nicol and

Macfarlene-Dick (2006), and Juwah et al. (2004). The checklist is as follows:

1. score/grade
2. stating students' current learning state
3. goals to work towards
4. correct answers
5. explanation of the correct answers
6. suggestions for improvement
7. specific activities for improvement
8. facilitates self-reflection
9. encourages positive motivation and self-esteem, and
10. encourages teacher and peer dialogue.

### **FINDINGS**

The findings of this study are divided into two parts: the PT3 sample essay and the SPM sample essay.

#### **Findings of PT3 Sample Essay Analysis**

A total of 42 PT3 sample essays were returned to the researcher. All were marked using a comprehensive marking style, with no specific errors marked and/or corrected. From this number, 32 teachers marked Implicitly, which is not correcting the errors, while nine teachers marked Explicitly, which is correcting the errors committed by the student. In addition, there is one sample essay marked using Impression marking style, which gives marks without making any mark on the sample essay. Table 3 below summarises the analysis of the written corrective feedback (WCF).



Table 3  
*Analysis of WCF (PT3)*

Type of WCF	n	Percentage, %	N
Explicit	9	22%	41
Implicit	32	78%	
Selective	0	0%	41
Comprehensive	41	100%	

\*1 with impression marking

From the sample essays, written corrective feedback ranges from zero to 25 on the sample essays. Most of the teachers ( $n = 18$ ) corrected between six to ten errors on the sample essays. It is followed by 11–15 corrective feedback ( $n = 9$ ), followed by zero to five ( $n = 8$ ), five teachers gave 16–20 corrective feedback, and two teachers gave 21–25 corrective feedback. Table 4 depicts the corrective feedback count for PT3.

Table 4  
*Corrective feedback count (PT3)*

CF Count	Frequency	Percentage, %
0–5	8	19
6–10	18	42.9
11–15	9	21.4
16–20	5	11.9
21–25	2	4.8
TOTAL	42	100

In terms of comments, 17 teachers did not comment on the student's sample essay, twelve others wrote only one comment, seven teachers wrote two comments, three teachers wrote three comments, and two

teachers wrote four comments. Table 5 illustrates the number of comments per script for PT3.

Table 5  
*Number of comments per script (PT3)*

No. of Comment	Frequency	Percentage, %
0	17	41.4
1	12	29.3
2	7	17.1
3	3	7.3
4	2	4.9
5	-	0
TOTAL	41	100

All the feedback could be distributed into eleven types, where the highest number of teachers ( $n = 10$ ) gave the correct answers. Nine teachers gave scores and/or grades, and the same number of teachers identified the students' current learning state. Often enough, this is taken from the marking rubric prepared by the Examination Board. For example, teacher #77 wrote '*task fulfilled*' and '*some mistakes in grammar and spelling*'. Teacher #88 also made

remarks about the student’s current learning by listing four comments, which were 1) *Task is fulfilled*; 2) *Ideas are sufficiently developed*; 3) *Vocabulary is sufficient but lacks precision*; and 4) *Interest is sufficiently aroused*. Again, these kinds of remarks could be found in the marking rubric.

Six teachers encouraged positive motivation and self-esteem. For example, teacher #83 wrote ‘*very good writing*,’ and teacher #192 wrote ‘*good try!*’ Four teachers wrote suggestions for improvement (‘*use sentence connectors*’ and ‘*some of the sentences could be merged, so that it’ll*

*be longer + complete with some details.*’), four teachers explained the correct answers, and two teachers encouraged teacher dialogue (‘*come and see me*’). Two teachers facilitate self-reflection (‘*why did you serve the cake when you realised the cake was salty beforehand?*’). Only one teacher commented on goals to work towards, and another teacher’s comment fell under ‘Other’. None of the teachers suggested specific activities for improvement. Table 6 below depicts the distribution of comments according to feedback type for PT3.

Table 6  
Distribution of comments according to feedback type (PT3)

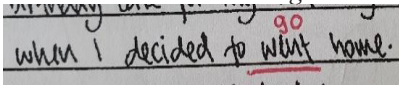
No	Type of Feedback	Examples of Feedback	Frequency										
1.	Score/grade	Mark range: (full mark is 15) <table border="1" style="margin-left: 20px;"> <thead> <tr> <th>Mark</th> <th>n</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>7</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>8</td> <td>5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>10</td> <td>2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>12</td> <td>1</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Mark	n	7	1	8	5	10	2	12	1	9
Mark	n												
7	1												
8	5												
10	2												
12	1												
2.	Correct answer	<i>To went</i> been corrected <i>to go</i> : 	10										
3.	Explanation of the correct answer	“ <i>to + base word, e.g., to go</i> ”	4										
4.	State students’ current learning state	<i>Task is fulfilled.</i> <i>Ideas are sufficiently developed.</i> <i>Vocabulary is sufficient but lacks precision.</i> <i>Interest is sufficiently aroused.</i>	9										
5.	Goals to work towards	nil	1										
6.	Suggestions for improvement	‘ <i>use sentence connectors</i> ’ ‘ <i>some of the sentences could be merged, so that it’ll be longer + complete with some details.</i> ’	4										

Table 6 (Continued)

No	Type of Feedback	Type of Feedback	Frequency
7.	Specific activities for improvement	nil	0
8.	Facilitates self-reflection	'why did you serve the cake when you realised the cake was salty beforehand?'	2
9.	Encourage positive motivation & self-esteem	'very good writing' 'good try!'	6
10.	Encourage teacher & peer dialogue	'come and see me'	2
11.	Other comment	'do your correction'	1

### Findings of SPM Sample Essays Analysis

Table 7

Analysis of WCF (SPM)

Type of WCF	<i>n</i>	Percentage, %	N
Explicit	3	6.4	47
Implicit	36	76.6	
Explicit + Implicit	8	17.0	47
Selective	0	0	
Comprehensive	47	100	

Out of the 47 sample essays received, all of them were marked using the Comprehensive style. From this, 36 were marked Implicitly, while three were marked Explicitly. However, eight teachers marked the sample essays with a combination of Explicit and Implicit styles. Table 7 above illustrates the analysis of WCF for SPM samples.

In terms of corrective feedback, the lowest count was 20, while the highest was 77. For example, one teacher gave 20

corrective feedback on the sample essay, and only one teacher gave 77. A total of nine teachers gave corrective feedback within the 46–50 range, followed by eight teachers who gave 36–40 corrective feedback, and seven teachers who gave 41–45 corrective feedback. Finally, four teachers gave 56–60 corrective feedback, while one teacher gave 61–65, 66–70, and 71–75 corrective feedback. Table 8 illustrates the corrective feedback count for SPM.

Table 8

*Corrective feedback count (SPM)*

CF Count	Frequency	Percentage, %
16–20	1	2.1
21–25	4	8.5
26–30	1	2.1
31–35	3	6.5
36–40	8	17.1
41–45	7	14.9
46–50	9	19.1
51–55	6	12.8
56–60	4	8.5
61 – 65	1	2.1
66–70	1	2.1
71–75	1	2.1
76–80	1	2.1
TOTAL	47	100

In terms of the comment, 18 teachers did not give any comment at all, while nine only gave one comment, ten teachers wrote two comments, seven teachers wrote three comments, one teacher wrote four comments, and two teachers wrote five comments on the student sample essays. Table 9 depicts this information.

The feedback could be distributed to eleven types, where 15 of the teachers wrote scores/grades on the essay, while 13 others encouraged positive motivation and self-esteem. Examples of positive motivation and self-esteem are “*very interesting!*” and “*good try,*” written by Teacher #16. In contrast, Teacher #352 wrote, “*Don’t stop writing. I can see your potential—just need to polish it,*” and a smiley accompanied this remark at the end.

Table 9

*Number of comments per script (SPM)*

No. of Feedback	Frequency	Percentage, %
0	18	38.3
1	9	19.1
2	10	21.3
3	7	14.9
4	1	2.1
5	2	4.3
TOTAL	47	100

Eleven teachers gave the correct answers and suggestions for improvement. One of the respondents, for example, listed four suggestions for improvement, namely 1) *Please be careful with the tense you use;* 2) *Just stick to simple past tense that will minimise your errors;* 3) *Try to use sophisticated words/phrases to enhance the accuracy of your sentences,* and 4) *Please read your essay before submitting it as it helps you a lot in detecting errors/missing words.*

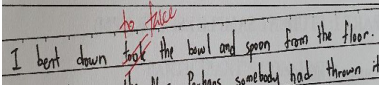
Two teachers explained the correct answers, and two others commented ‘Other.’ However, none of the teachers commented on goals to work towards, gave specific activities for improvement, or encouraged teacher and peer dialogue. Table 10 below illustrates the distribution of comments according to feedback type for SPM.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings from the student sample essays indicate that most teachers in this present study mark their students’ essays

Table 10

*Distribution of comments according to feedback type (SPM)*

Type of Feedback	Examples of Feedback	Frequency
Score/grade	Grade	Score n
	Satisfactory (C5 – C6)	26 – 30 6
	Passable (D7)	21 – 25 4
	Unsatisfactory (E8)	16 – 20 3
	Poor (F9)	15 – 0 2
Correct answer	The word <i>took</i> has been corrected as <i>to take</i> . 	11
Explanation of the correct answer	Past tense	2
	was	X telah dilihatkan??
	looked	
	looked	√ telah melihat
	was	√ sedang melihat (lepas)
	looking	
State students' current learning state	<i>“Errors in wrong usage of prepositions, articles and determiners somehow hinder the reading”</i>	10
Goals to work towards	nil	-
Suggestions for improvement	<i>Just stick to simple past tense that will minimise your errors. Try to use sophisticated words/phrases to enhance the accuracy of your sentences. Please read your essay before submitting it as it helps you a lot in detecting errors/missing words.</i>	11
Specific activities for improvement	nil	-
Facilitates self-reflection	nil	-
Encourage positive motivation & self-esteem	“Very interesting!”	13
	“Good try”	
	“Don't stop writing. I can see your potential – just need to polish it”	
Encourage teacher & peer dialogue	nil	-
Other comments	“Please do the correction!”	2
	“short [sic] than required number – write longer please!”	

comprehensively and implicitly. That means teachers would mark almost all errors they could locate on the essays, but the corrected forms are not provided. This result is concurrent with the findings from Lee (2008) where she found that most the teachers' feedback on students' writings was focusing on the students' errors. It is in line with a long-held belief as mentioned by Lalande (1982), specifically on comprehensive error correction, where he wrote, "unless all errors are identified, the faulty linguistic structures, rather than the correct ones, may become ingrained in the students' interlanguage system" (p. 140). However, more recent literature suggests that comprehensive error correction may overwhelm the student, as their limited processing ability may not digest the amount of WCF provided by their teachers (Ellis et al., 2006), so comprehensive marking may not be as effective as teachers hope. Moreover, such practice is unclear, inconsistent, and overemphasised the negative (Fregeau, 1999; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). Williams (2003) argues that correction of errors allows passive action among the students who would rewrite the corrected form without knowing the nature of their errors. Therefore, this practice is ineffective in promoting learning among the students.

The findings of the teachers' marking on the student sample essays came back with some peculiarities. First, there was one teacher who used impression marking on the PT3 sample essay. Impression marking, as mentioned by Baird et al. (2004), is based upon a general impression of the essay by

the examiners. Impression marking is not designed to correct or edit a piece of writing or even to diagnose its weakness, but rather is a set of procedures for assigning a value to the writing according to a list of previously established criteria (Charney, 1984). Baird et al. (2004) claimed that there are problems related to impression marking: the reliability and validity of the marks awarded through this procedure. In their attempt to rectify this issue, they have carried out an experiment using the theory of community of practice and found that neither use of exemplar essays nor discussion between examiners demonstrated an improvement in marking reliability. Because of this, the effectiveness of general impression marking has been questioned. In the context of PT3 and SPM, the general impression is used.

However, it has not been a practice among teachers because they are still required to check for errors to justify their marks for the essay. It is particularly true for SPM level essays. For example, in order to award band D7 (21–25 marks) for SPM Paper 1 (Continuous Writing), teachers need to identify "many mistakes in grammar but the meaning is still clear—patches of accurate language use occur." Without marking the student's essay, it is arguable how teachers can justify the marks they give. Moreover, the teachers in this present study were asked to mark the essay "as they would normally do in the classroom;" hence if the teacher uses impression marking without making any marking on the essay, the students may not be able to know what is wrong with the essays that they

deserve such mark. Nyquist (2003) labelled feedback that gives only the score or grade as 'weaker feedback only.' This kind of feedback is not in line with the suggestions in implementing AfL as suggested by Black et al. (2003), where score or grade only may not enable students to improve the essay nor the following essay. Moreover, Black and Wiliam (1998) noted that such marking and grading practices emphasise competition, not the student's improvement.

It has also been noted that teachers in this present study employed a mix of explicit and implicit marking ( $n = 8$ ). These teachers would mark some errors and give the correct forms while leaving some errors marked but not corrected. It means that teachers still employ comprehensive error correction marking. Teachers believe that language accuracy is an important focus in their feedback, and this echoes the results of previous studies (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Hyland, 2003; Lee, 2008). As mentioned above, comprehensive error correction marking may not necessarily promote students' learning, even though many teachers practice it (Lee, 2009) and students prefer it (Salteh & Sadeghi, 2015). In the study done by Lee (2009), it was found that 94.1% of the teachers in that study focused on correcting error forms, while they believe that there are more to writing besides grammar accuracy, such as delivering good ideas. The study done by Salteh and Sadeghi (2015) reveals that 77% of the students in that study prefer indiscriminate correction of all errors in their essays. The present study may not be able to reveal students' preference for written corrective feedback,

but the findings echo the previous studies on the same issue.

Even though many students prefer correcting all errors, as mentioned above, Salteh and Sadeghi (2015) also noted some issues related to comprehensive error marking. In their study, Salteh and Sadeghi noted that 23% of the students felt frustrated when receiving their essays filled with red marks. The same frustration by students was highlighted more than twenty years ago by Reid (1998). Moreover, Lee (2004) caution that marking all errors in the students' essays could enslave the teachers, as mentioned by many earlier studies (Enginarlar, 1993; Ferris, 2002; Mantello, 1997). Hence, it can be said that teachers in the present study still practice what has been mentioned as not thoroughly effective in the earlier studies.

In terms of teachers' comments, Lunsford (1997) stated that three well-thought-out comments per essay is optimum, given that students would act on those comments. Ferris (2006) in a study found that students utilized the teachers' feedback in their revision, and this refuted earlier studies done by Cohen and Robbins (1976), Truscott (1996), and Zamel (1985). However, it is a concern for those teachers who did not comment on the sample essays, besides marking the errors committed on the essays. If this is their common practice in the classroom, students may not get much help from these teachers. Feedback, at its basis, should tell the students their current state of learning, the goal they need to achieve, and how to achieve the goal (Black, 1999). Comprehensive error correction, without any other feedback, cannot even be

categorised into any typology of feedback, either by Nyquist (2003) or Black (1999), let alone those criteria of good feedback (Jawah et al., 2004; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Irons (2008) listed no feedback as lousy feedback; therefore, it should be avoided.

As Lee (2009) mentioned, teachers acknowledged that students would ignore their other feedback if they wrote scores or grades on their essays. However, it is arguable that such grade or score is necessary to state the students' current learning state, as defined by Black (1999). By knowing their grade or score for a particular essay, the students will know their level of attainment, allowing them to work towards the goal of obtaining a grade of A.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE**

The findings of this present study prove that there is a need to include written feedback into teacher training courses, especially for English Language teachers. There is little emphasis on written feedback on students' writings within teacher training courses, especially in Malaysia. Besides the courses on Theories of Assessment, teacher trainees should also be taught on how to give feedback to their students' work. An emphasis on process writing should also be included. It is to match with the current school-based assessment system that takes place in Malaysian schools now.

Another suggestion that could be made is to put more emphasis on giving feedback

to students' work. There is no mention of how teachers should mark and give feedback to the students' writings in the English Language syllabus for both primary and secondary schools. According to the English Language Curriculum Specification for Form 1 (Ministry of Education, 2003), under the subtopic Evaluation, "After every lesson, teachers are encouraged to assess their set of learners through simple questioning techniques or some other exercise so that they can pace their lessons in accordance with learners' progress" (p. 5). However, the simplistic instruction on evaluation is not enough to give the right ideas to the teachers on how to give feedback to their students' work, let alone on giving feedback on the writings.

Perhaps, we should learn from our neighbouring countries, which elaborate further on assessing the students' work. Take Singapore for example, in their English Language Syllabus Primary and Secondary (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2010), teachers are guided in planning assessment through a framework in the syllabus (see page 123, Singapore English Language Syllabus, 2010). On the other hand, Hong Kong's English Language Syllabus comes with Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2007). In the guide, thorough explanation is given not only on the curriculum, but also on teaching and learning process, as well as on carrying out assessments in schools. In terms of writing, teachers are guided on how to carry out process writing in the classrooms (see p. 116, Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2007),



and teachers are also reminded of timely feedback on the students' work. These comparisons show a need for the Malaysian Education Ministry to relook into our current syllabus. At the same time, universities and teacher training colleges also need to restructure their teaching courses so that effective written feedback practices can be taught to pre-service teachers.

Teachers also need to change their marking style from comprehensive to selective marking. They have been complaining about time constraints they face in schools, and perhaps selective marking would make their feedback practice easier. By focusing on certain aspects of grammatical items, teachers are not burdened to go through word by word to find errors in the students' writings. On the other hand, students may find it less intimidating to see fewer red marks on their essays. Selective marking could also help the students to stay focused when they are revising their essays. It could be done if teachers could link their written corrective feedback systematically with their grammar instruction in the classrooms.

Finally, teachers' written feedback should adhere to good feedback as proposed by earlier literature. Concerning written feedback, teachers must remember that comprehensive WCF may not always be the best. Besides taking up so much of the teachers' time, it can also overwhelm the students. Therefore, teachers need to be selective in marking errors. Teachers should tie the writing task to a certain grammatical aspect during the writing

lesson. Teachers also need to remember that written commentary is not the only option. Student-teacher conferences should also be utilised to clarify their problems in completing the writing task. Moreover, both positive and negative feedback are equally important in supporting the students' learning, but they must always be linked to the task at hand, or the feedback would be meaningless. In terms of feedback timing, there is no fast rule as to when it is the best time to provide written feedback. Whether the feedback is immediate or delayed, it would be useless unless the students can revise their essays and raise their grades. Nevertheless, teachers need to consider the nature of the task and the ability of the students. As Mathan (2003) claimed, immediate feedback would be most beneficial for the student's learning if the task is difficult, but delayed feedback may be better if the task is easy. As such, delayed feedback may promote the transfer of learning better, such as in concept-formation tasks, while immediate feedback may be more efficient for procedural skills (Corbett & Anderson, 2001).

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is not without its limitations. Firstly, this study is limited in scope where it is to look only into the written feedback given by the teachers to students' writings. It is acknowledged that AfL covers four main components, namely questioning, feedback through marking, peer- and self-assessment, and the formative use of summative test. However, only the second component, i.e.,

feedback through marking, is examined. The other components are not being examined, although it is to be made aware that they may play a vital role in teachers' conception of feedback and their classrooms practices.

Secondly, as the participants of this study are teachers who teach in the state of Pahang, the findings of this study may not be generalised to the general population of Malaysian ESL teachers. It is because it may be almost impossible to collect data from each ESL teacher in Malaysia. Consequently, this study selected its respondents carefully so that they represent teachers from an array of different educational, experience and cultural backgrounds, to some extent, mirror the entire population of Malaysian ESL teachers.

Thirdly, since the researcher is the instrument in this study, bias may also affect the study results. Therefore, cross-checking with other raters was carried out to reduce the effect of researchers' biases. It includes cross-checking the reliability of the transcriptions before the coding process is done, the validity of the codes of the transcriptions, and overall data analysis.

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