



## EFL LEARNERS' RESPONSE TO TEACHER WRITTEN FEEDBACK: AN EXPLORATORY CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Hoang Thi Linh Giang\*

University of Foreign Languages, Hue University, 57 Nguyen Khoa Chiem St., Hue, Vietnam

**Abstract.** Teacher feedback plays a central role in second language writing research. Although this area of enquiry has been extensively investigated, there is still limited research into learner engagement with the feedback as well as individual difference factors that mediate learner revision processes. Inspired by the ongoing debate around the effectiveness of teacher written feedback and the roles of individual learner factors in feedback activities, the current exploratory multiple-case study examined how two Vietnamese EFL learners of different proficiency levels revised their essays following written feedback provision. Data came from text analyses of the first and revised drafts written by the two case studies. The learners' revision practices were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative measures. Qualitatively, revision operations were identified using Min's [17] revision taxonomy to look at both micro-text-based and macro-text-based changes, while quantitative measures examined the accuracy, fluency, and complexity changes observed from students' first to revised drafts. Findings suggest some interaction between learner proficiency, revision behaviors, and short-term writing improvement across different drafts within the same essay. Implications for feedback practices are accordingly presented.

**Keywords:** Written feedback; Revisions; Learner proficiency; Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency measures (CAF measures)

### 1. Introduction

Teacher feedback (TF) is considered a central player in most second and foreign language writing classes [10]. To date, researchers have primarily focused on the impacts of teacher feedback on second language learners' writing skills and their L2 linguistic accuracy. To gain insights into TF effectiveness, several authors have proposed that students' process of writing and revision should be investigated within a social-cultural framework which views feedback activities as two-way communication involving the teacher and individual learners [e.g., 13, 12, 22]. To enhance the value of TF on learners' writing and revision processes, writing instructors need to accommodate their feedback to individual learner needs and preferences. Accordingly,

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\* *Corresponding:* htlgiang@hueuni.edu.vn

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deeper investigations are needed for individual factors such as learner proficiency, learner beliefs about writing and revisions, or their motivation.

Among the most well researched areas of TF is written corrective feedback (WCF) which is informed by theoretical foundations and empirical evidence. Long's [16] *focus on form* perspective supposed that implicit learning alone is not sufficient and that *focus on form* is necessary in language teaching and learning. *Focus-on-form* interventions as in the shape of corrective feedback can thus steer learners' attention to gaps in their interlanguage development. This implies the necessity of written corrective feedback for improved writing quality among second language writers. Beside ample support for corrective feedback, there are arguments against its use. One of the most compelling arguments against WCF is a debate initiated by Truscott [27] who pointed out problems that invalidate the use of such feedback, including the lack of systematic and consistent approaches to delivering error correction among teachers as well as the limited ability and willingness to pay attention to the feedback among learners. The current research is inspired by the ongoing debate around the effectiveness of teacher written feedback, with a particular focus on EFL students' revisions in response to this feedback.

## 2. Literature Review

The following sections review the relevant concepts in TF research and empirical studies that lay the foundations for the current study.

### 2.1. Teacher written corrective feedback

The bulk of research on TF has focused on WCF, which is teacher response to linguistic errors found in student essays. Ellis [4] proposed a typology of the corrective feedback (CF) teachers provide on learner writing. This typology is adapted and presented in Figure 1.

	Type of CF	Description
1	Direct CF	The teacher provides the student with the correct form.
2	Indirect CF	The teacher indicates that an error exists but does not provide the correction.
3	Metalinguistic CF	The teacher provides some kind of metalinguistic clue as to the nature of the error.
4	The focus of the feedback	This concerns whether the teacher attempts to correct all (or most) of the student's errors or selects one or two specific types of errors to correct. This distinction can be applied to each of the above options.

a. Unfocused CF	Unfocused CF is extensive.
b. Focused CF	Focused CF is intensive.
5 Reformulation	This consists of a native speaker's reworking of the student's entire text to make the language seem as native-like as possible while keeping the content of the original intact.

**Figure 1.** Typology of written corrective feedback adapted from Ellis [4].

Research into WCF has ranged from investigating the impact of direct and indirect feedback [e.g., 10] to studying the differential effectiveness of focused and unfocused written CF [e.g., 5] or focusing on the more nuanced comparison between different forms of direct written CF [e.g., 1]. Despite the inconclusive findings from various studies on different types of WCF, the second language writing community seems to approach an agreement forwarded by Li, Link, and Hegelheimer [14] that if non-native writers can improve their linguistic accuracy, this can benefit their expression of ideas.

## 2.2. Student response to WCF

Studies into students' response to WCF have investigated their cognitive engagement (e.g., 20), uptake, and retention of the feedback. Unlike the qualitative nature of learners' cognitive engagement with WCF, feedback uptake and retention are more often measured quantitatively by counting revision points using a framework of categorising students' types of response to the feedback as demonstrated in their revisions.

### 2.2.1. Uptake

The current study examined both textual and content revisions made by the two cases as demonstrated in their revised drafts following feedback provision. Therefore, Min's [17] framework for analyzing types, sizes, and functions of revisions is applicable. Min [17] analysed seven types and six levels of revisions in response to TF, as in Figure 2.

Surface Changes		Text-based Changes	
		<i>Microstructure changes</i>	<i>Macrostructure changes</i>
Additions	<i>Reviser adds information</i>	Additions	Additions
Deletions	<i>Reviser deletes information</i>	Deletions	Deletions
Substitutions	<i>Reviser substitutes information</i>	Substitutions	Substitutions
Permutations	<i>Reviser rephrases information</i>	Permutations	Permutations

Distributions	<i>Reviser rewrites same information in larger chunks</i>	Distributions	Distributions
Consolidations	<i>Reviser puts separate information together</i>	Consolidations	Consolidations
Reorderings	<i>Reviser moves information</i>	Reorderings	Reorderings

**Figure 2.** Min's [17] taxonomy of types of revisions with explanations added in italics.

The revisions are evaluated as surface or text-based levels, both with seven types of revisions, including *adding, deleting, substituting, rephrasing, or reordering* information in the texts. In addition, the learner can also rewrite the information using larger chunks of language or put together previously separate information, what Min termed *distributions* and *consolidation*, respectively. Text-based changes are sub-divided into micro-text-based changes and macro-text-based changes. While micro-text-based changes take place over a group of sentences, paragraphs, or the entire text but maintain the whole meaning of the text, macro-text-based changes create a new gist for the ideas in the text, thus affecting its overall summary [17].

Concerning the size of revisions, Min [17] based the typology on the level of discourse that the revision takes place. This creates six levels going from the lowest of making change to a symbol in the text (e.g., a comma, a period) to word or lexical level (i.e., adding, deleting or changing a single word), phrase, clause, sentence, to the highest level of a paragraph (adding, deleting, or rewriting a whole paragraph).

### 2.2.2. Evaluation of writing development

To supplement our understanding of what contributes to better writing quality in student essays through the use of TF, the analysis of revisions can be conducted alongside the measurement of writing development. Of the most popular tools used in research studies measuring writing development is the triad of complexity, accuracy, and fluency measures (or CAF measures for short).

Larsen-Freeman's [11] and Storch's [24] studies are clear examples of how different quantitative measures of CAF are used. To quantitatively measure accuracy in her study on how studying in an ESL-environment university affects students' L2 writing development, Storch [24] calculated the number of error-free clauses per clauses (EFC/C), the number of errors per words (E/W), and error-free T-units per T-units (EFT/T). The three measures she used for fluency include the number of words (W), number of T-units (T), and words per T-units (W/T). Complexity was sub-divided into grammatical complexity and lexical complexity, each of which had its own quantitative measures. The former was evaluated by the number of clauses per T-units (C/T) and the number of dependent clauses per clauses (DC/C), while the latter was

based on the percentage of academic words used in an essay compared to the Coxhead's Academic Word List and the frequency count of informal expressions in essays. Similar measures were found in Larsen-Freeman's [11] longitudinal investigation which employed EFT/T for accuracy, W/T for fluency, C/T for grammatical complexity and the type-token ratio (i.e., word types per square root of two times the words) for lexical complexity.

### **2.3. Research on student revisions in response to TF**

Ample research has been conducted on different factors that moderate the effectiveness of written feedback on student revisions and writing development. Most frequently found are studies about the differential effectiveness of different types of TF. Targeting mixed written feedback on both form and content, Razali and Jupri [21] found that among the three types, suggestion, criticism, and praise, students revised most successfully using the criticism type of feedback which specifically pinpoints the errors in a direct manner such as "incorrect use of preposition" or "there is no thesis statement". Another factor, scope of written feedback, was examined in Harran's [8] survey among 186 ESL Management-majored students who were asked to assess the amount of feedback they received from their teachers in terms of organization, content, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling on report-writing assignments. The results show students' perceptions of receiving more feedback on meaning (content and organization) than on spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. Students also reported greater attention to revisions on organization and content than linguistic issues when they wrote their final drafts.

Regarding form-focused feedback, students' accurate revisions were found to be more closely linked to direct corrective feedback than indirect feedback [e.g., 26, 28]. Turning to the focus of WCF, Li and Vuono [15] found that the most common feedback practice among EFL writing teachers seems to be comprehensive feedback, despite the greater value of focused feedback for student revisions reported in previous literature [e.g., 4, 6, 9]. Adopting CAF measures to examine improved writing performance following WCF, Mubarak [18] conducted a 12-week quasi-experimental study involving 46 Bahraini media students, divided into three feedback conditions: direct corrective feedback, error underlining (indirect feedback), and no corrections but rather simple and summative comments on performance (control group). Results from the pre-, post- and delayed post-tests show no significant effect of either type of feedback on students' writing accuracy, grammatical or lexical complexity, despite the teachers and the students' beliefs in the value of the feedback. Focusing on learner variables and revisions in response to WCF, Park, Song, and Shin [19] compared revisions conducted by beginner and intermediate learners in response to indirect feedback. The intermediate learners experienced a statistically higher revision success rate, leading to the authors' speculation that

higher proficiency learners possess greater linguistic repertoire and thus are more likely to make accurate revisions following indirect feedback.

The review of the literature shows a scarcity of research on learner variables that influence student revisions. To gain a deeper understanding of students' revisions in response to TF, Conrad and Goldstein [3] pointed out the necessity of more investigations into under-represented aspects of the problems students are being asked to revise and learner individual factors. Following Shintani and Ellis' [23] highlight of the paucity of research on how individual difference factors mediate the effects of feedback on learners' grammatical accuracy in writing, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do two EFL students of different proficiency levels differ in their revisions in response to teachers' written feedback?
2. How does the two students' writing quality change in the revised draft of the same essay?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Writing samples written by two EFL students were collected for this exploratory case study with a total of four essays. The first student, Kha, is a male professional looking for opportunities to further his studies in an English-medium university. He has learned English for 15 years. Judged by his IELTS score a few weeks after he agreed to write essays for this study, his proficiency in English is upper intermediate to advanced (IELTS 6.5 average). He wrote two drafts of one composition in response to a writing prompt for the second task in the IELTS academic module. His first draft was handwritten under a 40-minute time limit as an in-class practice activity. After receiving the teacher's feedback, he wrote the second draft at home without any time constraints.

On the other hand, the second student, Huy, is a male ninth grader at a secondary school in Vietnam. His proficiency level in English is pre-intermediate with five years' experience in learning English. He wrote an essay as a homework assignment in response to a writing task in the English 9 Textbook assigned by the teacher. After receiving TF on the first draft, he revised the essay in a second draft. Generally, for both drafts, Huy was under no time constraint. Writing prompts for both participants can be found in Appendix A.

#### **3.2. Data collection and data analysis**

Aiming at examining learners' response to teacher feedback, the researcher contacted the two participants and asked for their permission to collect first and revised drafts of their

composition. The writing prompt each participant composed essays to varied in terms of genres and levels of difficulty according to their proficiency. After gaining their permission, the two participants' writing samples were collected and analyzed.

A quick analysis of the four essays in this study reveals that the feedback points provided by the teacher are almost exclusively on form, not content. Both learners were instructed by the same EFL teacher who provided predominantly direct corrective feedback. For each error, the teacher provided the suggested correct form in replacement of the erroneous part of the writing. Some of the feedback points were reformulations of either incorrect or awkward structures spanning phrases or even clauses. In this research, these feedback points were also counted as corrective feedback when the teacher provided a reformulated structure to improve students' expression of ideas. Regarding the focus of the feedback, the TF observed in Kha and Huy's essays was comprehensive, targeting various types of errors as well as different levels from local to global issues.

The subsequent analysis of revisions is conducted both quantitatively and qualitatively as a way to triangulate the data for a more insightful view of how the students revised their essay in response to teacher feedback and whether any gains in writing quality are observed through two drafts of a single composition. To answer the two research questions, the following measures are used:

### 3.2.1. *Quantitative measures*

Comparison of students' first and second drafts are assessed using the CAF indices, with measures for accuracy being the number of error-free clauses per clauses (EFC/C), the number of errors per words (E/W), and error-free T-units per T-units (EFT/T). Regarding fluency, participants' revised drafts are assessed based on the number of words (W) and number of T-units (T). Finally, complexity is only based on the grammatical complexity measure of the number of clauses per T-units (C/T) and the number of dependent clauses per clauses (DC/C). As the students vary in their proficiency levels, writing purposes, and topical areas of their essays, the study chooses to ignore the measure of lexical complexity.

To consistently code T-units, this study takes Hunt's (1966, p. 735, as cited in 24) definition of T-unit as "one main clause plus whatever subordinate clauses happen to be attached to or embedded within in." To illustrate this part of coding, the following T-unit is taken from Khanh's essay:

*Student text:* (a) *Although an increase of population aging does not hit the headlines as frequently as many other issues do, (b) it is by no means less serious.* (coded as having one T-unit with two clauses)

*Clause (a):* (1) Although an increase (2) of (3) population aging does not hit the headlines as frequently as many other issues do (coded as a dependent/subordinate clause, with three errors in (1) spelling, (2) preposition, and (3) word order, as underlined)

*Clause (b):* it is by no means less serious. (Coded as the main clause, error-free clause)

### 3.2.2. Qualitative measures

As results from quantitative measures alone can be misleading regarding the true improvements each student can make to their essays, the drafts are also qualitatively analysed to see what kinds of revision have been made by each student. Each revision point in the students' revised drafts is analysed using Min's [17] taxonomy of revisions in terms of the types and sizes of revisions.

## 4. Findings

In the following sections, the findings are presented in accordance with the two research questions.

### 4.1. Students' revisions in response to TF

Kha's first draft received 28 feedback points on form and two general comments on content. Of the total 28 linguistic feedback points, only one response was recorded in the second draft which is a successful revision from "a population aging" to the correct form "an aging population" (re-ordering at phrasal level), making a response rate of 3.5%. In contrast, out of the 14 form-focused feedback points in the first draft, Huy made 13 revisions, all of which are successful. This makes a 93% response rate, and the one feedback point not responded to is the case when he deleted a whole phrase including the mistake pointed out.

What explains for such a discrepancy in the two students' response rates is the fact that Kha's second draft has macro-text-based changes which totally alter the direction of ideas and gist of the text. Despite the teacher's written compliment on the ideas but criticism about lexical choices in his first draft, Kha chose to experiment with new ideas in response to the same prompt, showing macro changes (additions and substitutions of ideas) in the second attempt. The removal of time restraints probably allowed for more brainstorming and refining of language use. In the first draft, Kha discussed the negative impacts of an aging population on a country and delineated the roots of such impacts, while in the second draft, he took a balanced approach by writing a for and against essay before stating his own view on this social trend. A major change in the gist led to an overall shift of direction, making the first and second drafts of the same composition so disparate in content to see any clear revisions in response to TF.



On the other hand, Huy's first draft received a total of 14 feedback points on form, and no written comments on content. Huy adopted almost every single feedback point provided and incorporated them in his second draft. Those changes are at the surface level by his simply copying the correct forms provided by the teacher while very few text-based changes took place. Using Min's taxonomy of sizes of revision analysis, the following results are found in Huy's responses to the teacher feedback:

- No changes at the paragraph level is recorded.
- Two sentential level changes took place: (1) replaced "I think Dalat is the most attractive [sic] place" with the reformulation provided by the teacher, "Dalat is the most attractive place I've visited" and (2) collapsed two sentences "It has a lot of flowers and the environment is very clean. The weather is also nice" into the suggested reformulated structure "It has flowers, clean environment and nice weather."
- Three phrasal level changes are observed: deletion of the whole phrase and two replacements of phrases using the corrected forms provided by the teacher.
- The rest of his responses to TF are at word level, either correcting a spelling mistake, changing nouns in the singular to plural form, or replacing a misused word.

#### 4.2. Writing improvement from the first to revised drafts

In order to see if the two students made improvements to their essays in the second attempt with the teacher feedback on the first draft, results in CAF measures for Kha, the higher proficiency level student, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Kha's CAF Measures from First to Revised Drafts

	Accuracy			Fluency		Grammatical complexity	
	E/W	EFC/C	EFT/T	W	T-units	C/T	DC/C
First draft	22/267 (8.2%)	8/21 (38%)	5/17 (29.4%)	267	17	21/17 (1.2)	4/21 (19%)
Second draft	14/352 (3.98%)	22/34 (65%)	13/21 (62%)	352	21	34/21 (1.6)	13/34 (38%)

In terms of accuracy, Kha seemed to have made substantial gains as the error per word ratio has gone down from 8.2% to 3.98%. Further support for this improvement in accuracy is found in significant increase in the rate of error free clauses out of the total number of clauses

and error free T-units of the total T-units, with 27% and 33% jumps in the figures respectively. Fluency also seems to improve from his first to second drafts with increases in both indices. The same positive change pattern applies to Kha's grammatical complexity measures, when the ratio of clauses per T-unit increases from 1.2 to 1.6 and the percentage of dependent clauses out of the total clauses doubles from 19% to 38%. Overall, Kha's revised essay showed substantial quantitative gains despite the fact that his second draft bore little resemblance to the first draft in terms of content and idea development.

Turning to Huy's writing improvements, Table 2 presents CAF measures for his first and second drafts.

**Table 2.** Huy's CAF Measures from First to Revised Drafts

	Accuracy			Fluency		Grammatical complexity	
	E/W	EFC/C	EFT/T	W	T-units	C/T	DC/C
First draft	10/197 (5.3%)	14/23 (61%)	9/20 (45%)	197	20	23/20 (1.15)	3/23 (13%)
Second draft	4/189 (2.1%)	15/19 (79%)	12/16 (75%)	189	16	19/16 (1.19)	3/19 (15.8%)

Judged by accuracy criteria, Huy improved almost as much as Kha did. From an error rate of 5.3% in the first draft, the figure goes down to 2.1% in his second attempt. The percentages of error free clauses of the total clauses, on the other hand, improves by 18%, and that of error free T-units of total T-units is a more substantial 30%. However, purely fluency measures show a decrease in both the total length with a slight drop in word count, and T-units number is from 20 down to 16, equivalent to a 20% decrease in T-units. Also, Huy's second draft does not show much difference to his first draft in terms of grammatical complexity, with minimal jumps in both percentages for clauses per T-unit and dependent clauses per clause.

## 5. Discussion

From the findings, it can be seen that Kha and Huy differ in their proficiency levels of English, which partially accounts for the different ways they responded to TF. Kha is more proficient, and he showed greater independence when trying to experiment with a different way to address the same writing prompt on the second try. His experiment resulted in an improved version compared to the first draft judged by all the CAF measures used in the current research. It is interesting to note that Kha's improved CAF indices did not come from

his direct response to the WCF he received. Instead, given the advantage of working at his own pace without any time constraints, Kha invested in substantial changes to his essay, namely macro-text-based changes in Min's [17] taxonomy, to create new ideas in the revised text. The extra time, which can equal more planning and self-editing, could be a significant factor leading to the marked improvements in his second draft. Similar to the reported attention to content and organization revisions among the ESL students in Harran's [8] study, Kha focused on making macro-text-based changes by taking a total new direction for the ideas in the second attempt.

On the contrary, being at a lower proficiency level, Huy simply adopted the large majority of the feedback points provided by the teacher in his revised draft although he was allowed to process the feedback at his own pace. The revisions he made, therefore, are surface changes to forms at phrasal and lexical levels. Huy's revision practices reiterate Ferris and Hedgcock's [7] suggestion that explicit feedback may suit lower proficiency level students most as they tend to rely on teacher corrective feedback to address errors in their essays. This finding also corroborates Park, Song, and Shin's [19] speculation about the value of direct feedback for low proficiency learners, given that the TF in the current research was predominantly direct corrections. Huy's reliance on TF, particularly uptake of WCF, provides a possible explanation for his substantial gains in accuracy measures but the absence of improvement in grammatical complexity from the first to revised drafts.

Both cases demonstrated improved accuracy following feedback provision, which does not corroborate Mubarak's [18] finding about the lack of significant improvements in students' writing accuracy and complexity following either direct or indirect feedback. This discrepancy may lie in the fact that Mubarak's experiment examined CAF changes in new writing (i.e., retention) after a 12-week intervention period, while the current research investigated the impact of TF on revisions and CAF measures from the first to revised drafts of one writing task. Accuracy gains recorded in Huy's revised essay add to previous literature on the potential benefits of learners' uptake of WCF for short-term writing improvement [25]. Specifically, this finding suggests some correlational relationship between uptake of WCF and improved linguistic accuracy across different drafts of the same composition.

## 6. Implications and Conclusion

From the analyses of the two participants' essays for this research, two variables stand out as mediating factors in EFL students' response to teacher feedback. Firstly, a student's level of proficiency in the target language can influence their response to TF. Lower proficiency students are more likely to make revisions at surface levels rather than at macro-text-based levels. Although previous research pointed out that the lack of properly staged and graduated

feedback could negatively impact L2 development [e.g., 2], large writing classes remain a norm in several EFL contexts. Writing instructors may find it overwhelming to provide graduated and individualized feedback to learner essays, but they can consider feedback practices that address different groups of learners of the same proficiency level. More attention should be directed to form-focused feedback for less proficient groups who are usually dependent on teacher feedback for a source of linguistic references. On the other hand, more advanced second language writers may prefer constructive feedback on higher order skills of writing such as discourse, organisation, and content when they revise their drafts, something that echoes Harran's [8] research on the ESL Management-majored students with the report-writing genre.

The second variable that can impact a student's revisions is whether time pressure is present. Working under time pressure tends to place students in a disadvantaged position to make substantial revisions, while if such a pressure is lifted, higher proficiency students like Kha in this study can experiment with more significant revisions and make improvements in overall writing quality. For revisions to become a true learning experience as such, students should be encouraged or even requested to revise their writing following feedback provision, with ample time allowance for their processing of and responding to the teacher feedback.

Finally, I acknowledge a number of limitations in this research. Firstly, taking an exploratory and multiple-case study approach through the use of two participants, the researcher cautions against any overgeneralizations about individual learners' response to teacher feedback beyond the scope of this study. Conclusions about the two mediating factors in EFL students' response to teacher feedback should also be interpreted cautiously as their generalisability is limited by the number of writing samples collected for each learner in the current research. To gain more convincing results, future research should aim to analyze and synthesize larger writing samples across various writing tasks.

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## Appendix A

Kha's Writing Prompt (IELTS Writing Task 2 – Academic Module)

*Figures show that some countries have an increasing proportion of the population who are aged 60 or older.*

*What do you think the effects of this may be?*

*Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge and experience.*

*Write at least 250 words.*

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Huy's Writing Prompt (assigned by 9<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher)

*Write about one favorite place you have visited.*