

Effect of Written Feedback Language on Motivation

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Little research has been conducted on how student motivation is affected by teacher feedback written in the students' first (L1) or target (L2) language. Here we use student survey responses to examine how teacher feedback written in students' L1 and L2 affects student motivation and perceptions of their written work over time. In the middle of the semester, students were allowed to change the feedback language; the majority of them wished to continue to receive feedback in the original language. We discuss some of the reasons why students did or did not decide to change feedback languages and explore student comments about their writing experiences.

教師がフィードバックする文書(コメント)による意見が、外国語として英語を学ぶ(EFL)生徒の反応と意欲へ与える影響を調査した研究は少ない。そのため、本研究では教師が生徒にフィードバックする意見が、第一言語(L1)と第二言語(L2)を使うことによる生徒の意欲と理解度への影響について調査した。学期の中間で、生徒は教師がフィードバックする文章の言語を変更することができた。ほとんどの生徒は学期の前半と後半で言語を変更しなかった。なぜ生徒が同一の言語を選択したかを調査する。またライティングの経験に関する生徒の意見についても調査する。

Research on instructors' written feedback in an EFL context has examined the effects on student motivation to learn English and perceptions about their own writing abilities (e.g., Chung, 2015; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Li & He, 2017). According to Mahfoodh and Pandian (2011), students view feedback as important for guiding their writing development and also gain confidence knowing that someone with authority is reviewing their work. Lee (2008) noted that L2 students, regardless of their proficiency level, want written comments from instructors about their work. Saito (1994) found that students prefer instructor feedback over other forms of noninstructor feedback, such as from peers or self-reflection. However, little research exists on differences between using the student's L1 or L2 for feedback, with the exception of Leis, Misawa, Laskar, Durdana, and Bakiyev (2015). Furthermore, to our knowledge, there is no research that specifically examines how or if the language of written feedback affects EFL students' perceptions of their English abilities and motivation to continue to write in English. This paper discusses how instructor feedback written in the L1 (Japanese) and in the L2 (English) may affect student perceptions of improving and enjoying their English writing in weekly homework writing assignments.

Context

The three authors conducted this study over one semester (15 weeks) at a mid-sized public university in south-central Japan. Each author was the instructor for one or more of six classes, with a total of 172 students. All students were enrolled in required English communications classes. Entrance exam scores and fields of study determined 1st-year student class assignments. TOEIC Bridge scores taken during this 1st year determined the class assignments for 2nd year and above. Instructors assigned each student a dialogue journal as a graded weekly homework assignment.

A dialogue journal can be described as a written conversation in which a learner or teacher (or other writing partner) communicate regularly (Peyton, 2000). Rather than

on mechanics and grammar, students should focus on their ideas and knowledge while writing in a nonthreatening environment. Students are encouraged to write as much as they can, with no points deducted for errors. Dialogue journals also provide a platform through which every student can communicate with the instructor directly.

Students completed voluntary surveys related to their weekly writing at the start, middle, and end of the semester. The surveys asked about students' perceptions of their English writing development as well as their motivations towards English writing and their desire to continue writing in English. Of the 172 students in these courses, 150 volunteered to complete all three surveys: 81 first-year students and 69 second- to 4th-year students. We obtained consent to use their data in this study.

Methodology

During the first classes of the term, we detailed the criteria for a weekly journal writing assignment focusing on sharing personal ideas and experiences in English. To increase their time spent engaging with English, students would use English for written communication outside of normal class times. At first, students wrote at least 50 words per journal entry, and as they became accustomed to writing, the word limit rose by 10 to 20 words per week. Students wrote in English each week and were allowed to include drawings or photos. Each journal entry counted as one point (out of 100) for end-of-term grades, and students who completed at least 13 weeks of writing (out of 15) received an additional bonus point. Topics changed each week with themes such as vacation, danger, and free choice. The assigned themes often corresponded to current textbook subject matter.

Each week, students submitted their journals for review by their instructors, who read and provided feedback. We arranged for boxes in the university's office so that students could deliver their journals outside of classroom hours. After reading and responding to an entry, we replaced the journals into these same boxes for retrieval. If a student forgot to retrieve a journal, we would check the box and return any journals found during class. We strived to return journals by the next class meeting, to allow students the longest amount of time to write their next entries.

At first, instead of error correction, feedback focused on praise, questions, or comments based on each entry's content. However, some students expressed a desire to have their work evaluated for grammatical and usage accuracy. For these students, we began to give some corrective feedback in addition to responses to their writing, although this did not affect the grading. The first author initially provided feedback in Japanese to 71 students, and the other two authors initially provided feedback in English

to 79 students. Although there was no formal agreement on what exactly to include in this feedback, we occasionally met and read the journals together. At such times, we shared ideas and information about what our students were writing and how we were responding. Sometimes students read our comments and wrote follow-up remarks, reinforcing the casual and conversational tone of the assignment. We encouraged these additional remarks but did not require them.

At the beginning of the term students were given a 4-point Likert scale survey with 12 items written in both English and Japanese. The surveys taken in the middle and at the end of the term contained four questions plus four free-response questions prompting students to reflect on their English writing development and motivations. (See Appendix.)

Our two main points of inquiry were (a) Did the language of written feedback affect students' enjoyment of writing English? and (b) Did the language of written feedback influence their perceptions of any improvement to their English writing? Two survey items were particularly helpful. Answers to the survey question "My English writing has improved" helped gauge if students perceived any benefits from the journals to their writing abilities over the course of the study. Student responses to the question "I enjoyed writing in my journal" helped examine their feelings towards their English writing experiences.

About halfway through the semester and after students had written at least seven entries in their dialogue journals, those who wanted to change the language of their feedback comments could do so. If a student was receiving comments in Japanese (L1), they¹ would then get comments in English (L2), and vice versa. Of the 71 students who began with Japanese comments, 14 opted to change to English (about 20%). Of the 79 students who began with English comments, eight decided to change to Japanese (about 8%).

Findings

Perceptions of Improved English Writing

Results shown in Table 1 indicate that students felt their writing improved over time, regardless of whether they received comments in their L1 or L2. At the middle of the research project, 60% of students who began with English comments and 67% of students who began with Japanese comments indicated they agreed that their English writing had improved since beginning their journals. By the end of the project, 82% of students who began with English comments and 83% of students who began with Japanese comments indicated their English writing had improved over the semester.

Table 1. Student Responses to the Statement “My English Writing Has Improved”

	<i>n</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Midterm L2 start	79	7	40	32	0
Midterm L1 start	66	5	39	20	2
End-term L2 start	56	6	40	10	0
End-term L1 start	62	14	37	10	1

Journal Writing Enjoyment

The results in Table 2 show that the majority of students in both the L1 and L2 comment groups enjoyed writing in their journals. At the middle of the term, 81% of students who began with English comments and 92% of those who began with Japanese comments reported they enjoyed writing in their journals. At the end of the term, the percentages slightly increased to 87% of students who began with English comments and 94% of those who began with Japanese comments. In neither group were there any large changes in enjoyment over time.

Table 2. Student Responses to the Statement “I Enjoyed Writing in My Journal”

	<i>n</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Midterm L2 start	79	18	46	12	3
Midterm L1 start	66	31	30	5	0
End-term L2 start	56	9	40	6	1
End-term L1 start	62	24	34	2	2

Discussion

The first point we wanted to investigate was if the language of written feedback affected students’ enjoyment of writing English. According to the survey results, most students in both feedback language groups agreed that they enjoyed writing in their journals during the semester, both at the middle and end of the semester. This lack of change indicates that the feedback language did not have an effect on how much students enjoyed writing

their journals and furthermore, that students generally enjoyed writing in English. We were pleased to find that even students who were not enrolled in a culture or English major enjoyed their dialogue journal assignments.

Student comments from this study were originally written in either Japanese or English. English comments are recorded as they were written; we translated the Japanese comments with the utmost care so as to maintain their original meaning.

In the end-of-term survey, some students wrote opinions about what language they preferred their comments to be written in. There are 73 comments in all. The most common response (38%) related to students desiring to study English (e.g., “Because I can learn to write in English”). Students who received feedback in Japanese as well as in English reported they enjoyed bonding with their instructors through their dialogue journals (e.g., “It makes us friendly”). Ten percent of students commented they preferred Japanese over English feedback because it was easier to understand. Some students admitted that although the Japanese feedback was easy to understand, they might have strengthened their reading skills with English feedback (e.g., “Japanese is easier to understand, but I want to improve my ability to read English”). Finally, 2% of responders felt the English comments provided more chances to read natural English (e.g., “We can touch real English”). We were surprised to find only a small number of students preferred Japanese feedback, because many of them were not English majors. It is possible that the low-risk journal-writing environment allowed students to relax while writing, or perhaps students appreciated the chance to regularly practice their English writing skills.

The second point we wanted to investigate was if the language of written feedback affected students’ perceptions of their English writing improvement. A majority of students in both language groups indicated they felt their English writing abilities improved over the course of the term, regardless of the language instructors used for feedback. The regularity of the journal assignment may have contributed to students’ feelings of improvement.

When we planned this study, we did not originally think about giving students a chance to change their feedback languages. After 2 or 3 weeks of the study, one author suggested the idea because it would allow us to gather opinions from students who had experienced both feedback types. As a result, we were pleased to find that 16 of 66 students who began the semester with feedback written in Japanese requested a change to English. Seven of those students gave reasons about why they wanted to change, and all of them indicated they wanted to practice their English reading and writing skills. For example, one student wrote, “I think if teacher’s comments is [sic] English, I’ll get more English reading skill.” Another wrote, “I want to train my English power.”

Of the 78 students who began with English feedback, only eight requested a change to Japanese. These results encourage the idea that our students have some desire to practice English in English class. Three of these students wrote comments about having trouble understanding the English feedback (e.g., “I can’t understand comments frequently”). Except for one of these students, all agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed writing in their journals, so it is unlikely that these students who changed the feedback language did so because they had no interest in English.

At the end of the semester, students who had requested to change their feedback language had the chance to comment on how their journal writing experiences changed. Ten students who changed from Japanese to English feedback wrote comments. Three students stated they could practice English with the English comments (e.g., “It was English reading practice”). Two students reported enjoying their instructors’ English comments (e.g., “I can enjoy reading and writing English”). Two students also reported that it was easier to understand a closer meaning of what the instructor wanted to communicate (e.g., “It was useful for me to understand your comment”). Two students reported no change (e.g., “It was same”) and one student felt they did not know how their experience changed (e.g., “I don’t know”).

Students who switched from English to Japanese feedback gave only three comments. Two comments did not indicate any change (e.g., “Comment language doesn’t change”), but one comment indicated that they recognized the instructor’s efforts to write in Japanese: “I thought you try hard, so I must write a [sic] good things.” Although this is only one remark, it shows that at least one student recognized that the teacher was also trying to write in an L2 language, and this encouraged the student to put effort into their own assignments.

Interestingly, some students who received feedback entirely in Japanese indicated that they recognized or appreciated their instructors’ efforts in trying to write in a foreign language. Nine out of 50 students who kept Japanese feedback wrote about the chance to bond with their instructor through mutual study (e.g., “It feels like we’re both studying together”). The others indicated that Japanese feedback was easier to understand than English feedback (e.g., “It is easy to understand it”).

No students that remained with English feedback commented that reading English was easier than reading Japanese. Instead, 27 of 36 students who gave comments wrote about English feedback being good for practicing or studying their L2 (e.g., “We can learn more English,” “We can learn correct English”). The other six students wrote that they preferred English feedback because the assignment itself was in English (e.g., “Because it is English diary [sic]”).

Considering these comments and how many students changed their feedback language, we felt that students generally have no strong opinion about their feedback language. Although it is true that many students expressed a desire to practice their English reading abilities, we concluded that they appeared to enjoy receiving any feedback, regardless of the language. Students became accustomed to their instructors’ feedback (in English or Japanese), and so perhaps they did not feel a change in language was necessary. As a result, we decided to start with English feedback in our future classes.

At the conclusion of this research, we felt that dialogue journals were useful not only as extended English writing practice outside of classroom hours, but also as practical supplements to general English education. Other teachers sometimes commented that students who were keeping dialogue journals seemed to have much more advanced writing than students who were not, although these may just have been words of encouragement from friendly colleagues.

Considerations for Future Research

Dialogue journals have many educational benefits (e.g., Peyton, 2000), especially as learning tools for second language learners (Linnell, 2010). In our study, having a control group would have allowed us to gather more data about our feedback, but we felt that as instructors, foregoing feedback to some of our students would unfairly impact their classroom experiences. Studies (e.g., Baleghizadeh & Mortazavi, 2014) have found that denying feedback to students from their instructors can significantly affect student perceptions of improvement and enjoyment with writing.

Regarding our feedback, we endeavored to focus on the content each student produced, while tailoring our language use to the level of our students. However, we did not analyze each instructor’s personal feedback style. Further studies on such style choices may yield useful data with relation to motivation towards or improvement in writing.

This paper’s data were taken only from students who volunteered to complete written surveys. Although the surveys were anonymous, students may have responded in what they felt would be viewed favorably by the instructors, in an effort to please them. Responses from students who did not volunteer were not counted, so it is possible that students who were less motivated in the first place were absent from the data.

Finally, although we were mostly satisfied with the implementation and execution of this dialogue journal research, we feel follow-up interviews at the end of the term would

provide even more data that could significantly enhance our understanding of dialogue journals, feedback, and how they can benefit both teachers and students.

Conclusion

Based on survey responses, it appears the language of written feedback on students' dialogue journal writing does not have an effect on whether or not those students enjoy writing in English. Choice of language feedback also does not seem to affect students' perceptions of improvement in their writing. A minority of students preferred Japanese comments due to ease of comprehension, but more students preferred English comments in an English environment because of the extra language practice reading such comments provides. Regardless of feedback comment language, students generally felt their writing skills improved during the course of one semester. It is unclear, however, whether the feedback itself is cause for these feelings of improvement or if some other factor had an influence. Further research, in which a no-comment control group is included, could clarify this uncertainty. In general, our students were usually content with comments in either language, and so feedback should be given in the language the instructor is more comfortable with.

Note

1. In this paper, we have chosen to use the pronouns they and their as singular pronouns of indeterminate gender.

Bio Data

Christopher Lyons received his MA in secondary education in English as a second language from Elms College and is one of two publication co-chairs for the Speech Drama and Debate SIG. He just started teaching at Kochi Nishi High School as a full-time English teacher. His research interests include dialogue journal writings, EFL student motivation, and performance assisted learning (PAL).

Philip Head holds an MA in TESOL from the University of Birmingham and is actively involved in academic publishing with *The Language Teacher*. He is currently a lecturer at Hiroshima Shudo University but was previously an assistant language teacher with the JET Programme in Kochi City, where he helped numerous junior and senior high school students prepare for English speech contests. His research interests include EFL student motivation, writing, and speech contests.

Simon Quinlan has over 15 years of English teaching experience and holds a Certification in TESOL. He is an adjunct professor at the University of Kochi and also teaches children and adults. His research interests are improving both students' fluency and motivation. His other interests are sports and music. He has a masters in composition and composes electronic-based music.

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Appendix

Journal-Writing Study—Pre-Survey

Gender 男 女

Age _____ 歳

この下の質問、答えをひとつ選んで、○をしてください。

一週間で、英語の自学は何時間ぐらいしますか？

How many hours a week do you study English by yourself? 0 1-2 3-4 5-6 7+

塾か英会話などで英語を勉強しますか？

Do you study English at a juku or eikaiwa? yes no

For the following questions, please circle 1 - 4 for your answer.

この下の質問、1 - 4 を選んで、○をしてください。

1 = まったくそう思わない 2 = あまりそう思わない

3 = 少しそう思う 4 = とてもそう思う

1. 日本語で日記や手紙などを書くことがあります。

I keep a journal or write letters in Japanese. 1 2 3 4

2. 日本語で日記や手紙などを書き始めたいとおもいます。

I want to start writing a journal or letters in Japanese. 1 2 3 4

3. 英語で日記や手紙などを書くことがあります。

I keep a journal or write letters in English. 1 2 3 4

4. 英語で日記や手紙などを書き始めたいとおもいます。

I want to start writing a journal or letters in English. 1 2 3 4

5. ソーシャルメディア (facebook, twitter, LINEとか) に英語で使います。

I use social media (facebook, twitter, LINE etc.) in English. 1 2 3 4

6. 英語の曲やテレビ番組を聞くことがあります。

I listen to music or watch TV shows in English. 1 2 3 4

7. 友だちや家族や先生などと英語を使うことがあります。

I use English with my family, friends, classmates, or coworkers. 1 2 3 4

8. 英語を使う時に、自信があります。

I feel confident when I use English. 1 2 3 4

9. 英語が好きです。

I like English. 1 2 3 4

10. 英語の力を上手になりたいと思います (喋ったり、書いたり)。

I want to improve my English abilities (speaking, writing, etc.). 1 2 3 4

この授業の日記は匿名です。研究のために使ってもよろしいですか。 yes no

Your journal for this class is anonymous. Is it okay to use your work for research purposes?

*Your journal is part of your class participation grade regardless of whether or not you participate in the study.

この日記は「授業での活動」の部分です。研究を参加しないばいでも日記をするのが必要です。

Journal-Writing Study—Mid-Term Survey

Please read the questions below. Check the circle which reflects your answer.

Then, give reasons why you chose the answers you did.

この下の質問、答えをひとつ選んで、○に✓をしてください。

そして、その答えの理由を書いてください。

1. How often do you read your teacher's comments in your journal? Always 毎回読みます

先生のコメントは、どれぐらい読みますか? Sometimes 時々読みます

Why? Never 読みません

2. Do you enjoy reading the comments? Very much とても面白いです

コメントを読むのが面白いですか? A little まあまあ面白いです

Why?	Not at all	全然面白くないです
3. Would you like to change the language in which comments are given?	Change	変更したいです
コメントの言語を変更したいですか? (日本語<->英語)	Don't change	変更したくないです

Why?	
4. How much time do you spend per week writing the journal?	
毎週、ジャーナルを書くのはどれぐらい時間を過ごしますか?	分

For the following questions, please circle 1 - 4 for your answer.

この下の質問、1 - 4を選んで、○をしてください。

1 =まったくそう思わない 2 =あまりそう思わない

3 =少しそう思う 4 =とてもそう思う

5. Do you enjoy writing in your journal?	1	2	3	4
ジャーナルを書くのが面白いですか?				

6. Do you feel that your English writing has improved since you began?	1	2	3	4
はじめから今まで、英語で書くのは上手になりました。				

7. Does writing in English feel easier than when you began this project?	1	2	3	4
はじめから今まで、英語で書くのは簡単になりました。				

8. Is writing in English less stressful than when you began this project?	1	2	3	4
はじめから今まで、英語で書くのは楽になりましたか?				

この授業の日記は匿名です。研究のために使ってもよろしいですか。 yes no

Your journal for this class is anonymous. Is it okay to use your work for research purposes?

*Your journal is part of your class participation grade regardless of whether or not you participate in the study.

この日記は「授業での活動」の部分です。研究に参加しないばいでも日記をするのが必要です。

Journal-Writing Study—End of Term Survey

Please read the questions below. Check the circle which reflects your answer.

この下の質問、答えをひとつ選んで、○に✓をしてください。

1. How often did you read your teacher's comments in your journal?	Always	毎回読みます
先生のコメントは、どれぐらい読みましたか?	Sometimes	時々読みます

Why?	Never	読みません
2. Did you enjoy reading the comments?	Very much	とても面白いです

コメントを読むのが面白かったですか?	A little	まあまあ面白いです
Why?	Not at all	全然面白くないです

3. About how much time did you spend per week writing the journal?	
毎週、ジャーナルを書くのはどれぐらい時間を過ごしましたか?	分

The next question is for students who did NOT change their comment language.

次の質問は、コメント言語はずっと同じ言語で書きましたの質問です。

4. What language would you prefer your comments to be written in? Why?	English	英語
コメントは、何語(英語か日本語)で書いたほうが良いと思いますか? 何でですか?	Japanese	日本語

The next questions are for students who DID change their comment language.

次の質問は、コメントの言語は途中変わりましたの質問です。

5. After your comment language changed, how did your writing experience change?	
コメント言語は変わったあとに、ジャーナルの経験はどう変わりましたか?	

6. Which language did you prefer? Why?	English	英語
どちらのコメントの言語はよかったですか? 为什么呢?	Japanese	日本語

For the following questions, please circle 1 - 4 for your answer.

この下の質問、1 - 4を選んで、○をしてください。

1 = まったくそう思わない 2 = あまりそう思わない

3 = 少しそう思う 4 = とてもそう思う

7. I enjoyed writing in my journal. 1 2 3 4

ジャーナルを書くのが面白かったです。

8. I feel that my English writing has improved since I began. 1 2 3 4

はじめから今まで、英語で書くのは上手になったとおもいます。

9. Writing in English is less stressful now than when I began this project. 1 2 3 4

はじめから今まで、英語で書くのは楽になりました？

10. I want to continue writing in my journal even after this class ends. 1 2 3 4

この授業が終わったら、ジャーナルを書くのが続きたいです。

Why or why not?

为什么呢？

*Your journal is part of your class participation grade regardless of whether or not you participate in the study.

この日記は「授業での活動」の部分です。研究に参加しないばいでも日記をするのが必要です。