



# 6

## Feedback Practices in University English Writing Classes in Tunisia: An Exploratory Study

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### Introduction

The provision of feedback is a very common practice in education. It is generally referred to as an instructional act which comes at the end of the teaching process. This process often starts with a teacher providing specific input to a group of learners, continues with the learners assimilating, manipulating and using that input, and ends with the teacher providing feedback on the learner's performance. Feedback is often defined as the practice that allows learners to improve their performances to meet certain learning targets. Chan, Konrad, Gonzalez, Peters, and Ressa (2014, p. 97) define it as “the information provided to the student or teacher about his or her performance that is intended to lead to improved performance.” Hattie and Timperley (2007), focusing on the interactional aspect in the provision of feedback, defined feedback as the information provided as a response to a specific performance or understanding. This

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information could be provided by a teacher, a classmate, a parent or a book, and is often meant to correct a mistake, clarify an idea, provide a different strategy, or give encouragement. The task of feedback provision, however, is widely thought to be restricted to teachers. Baker, Perreault, Reid, and Blanchard (2013) explained that it is generally believed that feedback provision is the responsibility of the teacher, especially in cultures where teachers are considered responsible for the whole learning process and perceived to have an unquestionable authority over all that happens in the classroom.

The role of feedback in instruction is well established and widely acknowledged. In the literature, the provision of feedback has been reported to positively correlate with improvement in learners' performance and achievement. Chappuis, Stiggins, Chappuis, and Arter (2012, p. 44) contended that "[p]roviding students with descriptive feedback is a crucial part of increasing achievement. Feedback helps the students answer the question, 'Where am I now?' with respect to 'Where I need to be?'" Chan et al. (2014, p. 96) highlighted the role of feedback in formative instruction. They explained that feedback could be considered as a means to integrate all components of formative instruction which include the setting of clear learning goals, collection of learning evidence and promotion of the students' ownership of the process. Qi and Lapkin (2001) referred to the role of feedback in drawing the attention of learners to the types of errors they make. They argued that feedback provision does not only allow learners to identify their errors, it also helps them focus on areas such as lexis, grammar and discourse, which has a positive impact on their learning process.

Different views exist about the function of feedback in learning. Evans (2013, p. 71) referred to the distinction between the cognitivist and socio-constructivist view of feedback. He explained that

[t]he cognitivist perspective is closely associated with a directive telling approach where feedback is seen as corrective, with an expert providing information to the passive recipient. Alternatively, within the socio-constructivist paradigm, feedback is seen as facilitative in that it involves provision of comments and suggestions to enable students to make their own revisions and through dialogue, help students to gain new understandings without dictating what those understandings will be.

Within the field of language learning, feedback seems to play a more significant role especially in relation to the learning of certain language skills which require the learner to use the language for communicative purposes. The teaching of the skill of writing, for example, does not only require the learner to construct the language from the input received but also necessitates continuous improvement of the learner's performance through the regular provision of feedback.

In relation to the types of feedback provided by teachers, the literature shows the existence of different typologies. Wanchid (2015) explained that these typologies vary according to the feedback provider or responder, mode of delivery and media of delivery. With reference to feedback provider, feedback is classified into self-feedback, teachers' feedback and peer feedback. In relation to the mode of delivery, feedback can be oral or written. With reference to the media of delivery, feedback can be paper and pencil or electronic. Some classifications were made based on the effect of feedback on the learning process, so feedback which enhances learning is often referred to as positive while feedback which provides critical comments is often referred to as negative.

Some typologies are only limited to written feedback. Based on its degree of explicitness, teachers' feedback can be direct, indirect or metalinguistic. Ellis (2009) explained that direct corrective feedback includes the writing of the correct form to be used by the student; indirect corrective feedback involves a reference to the error without correcting it; and metalinguistic corrective feedback includes some information about the nature of the error in the form of an 'error code'. Written feedback can also be focused or unfocused. While focused feedback involves the correction of specific types of errors, unfocused feedback refers to the teachers' correction of all of the students' errors (Ellis, 2009).

Feedback provision in education in general and in writing classrooms in particular has been the concern of a considerable body of research. Hyland and Hyland (2006) stated that the interest in feedback first started in L1 writing in the 1970s with the emergence of the 'learner-centred approach' to language teaching and the 'process approach' to writing instruction. Research on feedback in L2 writing began in the 1990s with a debate on the type of feedback to be provided to learners. Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, and Wolfersberger (2010) mentioned that

in the last two decades several studies (e.g. Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Ferris, 2006; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Hartshorn et al., 2010; Russell & Spada, 2006; Truscott, 2007) have been conducted to investigate the value of written corrective feedback in L2 writing classes. These last decades have also witnessed a movement from 'traditional' to 'modern' feedback practices. Hyland and Hyland (2006, p. 1) explained that there has been a change from "summative feedback, designed to evaluate writing as a product" to "formative feedback that points forward to the student's future writing and the development of his or her writing processes." Such developments have been the result of extensive research (e.g. Chandler, 2003; Ferris & Helt, 2000; Lee, 2007) on the effects of different types of feedback on writing accuracy conducted in some L2/foreign language teaching contexts worldwide.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, research has also focused on other issues such as teachers' feedback practices in L2 classrooms. Several studies (e.g. Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011; Lee, 2008; Nicol, 2007) were more concerned with the way teachers provide feedback to their students in their local contexts. More specifically, they were interested in the teachers' performance in terms of types and focus of feedback and knowledge and beliefs about feedback provision. Such studies are important as they focus on feedback provision from the teachers' perspective. Lee (2003, p. 218) explained that understanding how teachers provide feedback in their local contexts can help improve the quality of the feedback provided in the writing classrooms. He maintained that

In order to come up with a sound pedagogy of error feedback in the writing classroom, it is important to understand the issues teachers face while giving error feedback, their beliefs and their concerns. It is hoped that through obtaining such information, effective measures to cope with such a painstaking task can be designed.

## The Study

The present study was conducted to explore how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at the Institut Supérieur des Langues de Tunis (ISLT) provide feedback on their students' writing assignments. More

specifically, the study aimed to identify type of feedback used, what that feedback focuses on and the beliefs informing the feedback practices of Tunisian EFL writing teachers. The research thus poses the following three questions:

1. What is the type of feedback provided by EFL writing teachers?
2. What are the feedback focuses of EFL writing teachers?
3. What beliefs inform the feedback practices of these EFL writing teachers?

## Method

The study relied on a mixed-method design to collect the data needed to answer the research questions (see Table 6.1). A questionnaire and a structured interview were employed to gather information about the feedback practices of the sample of Tunisian EFL writing teachers. These practices were also explored through the analysis of written feedback provided by some of these teachers on a sample of students' essays.

## Students' Questionnaire

The questionnaire is divided into two sections (see Appendix 1). The first section consists of three questions about the respondent's gender, affiliation and level of study. The second contains twelve structured questions

**Table 6.1** Research design

Instruments	Subjects/ documents	Data type	Analysis procedures
Questionnaire	121 ISLT EFL students	Quantitative + qualitative	Descriptive statistics
Structured interview	7 ISLT writing teachers	Qualitative + quantitative	Coding + categorisation
Document analysis	60 essays	Qualitative	Coding + categorisation

and aims to collect data about the students' perception of the feedback practices at the ISLT. Some of the questions (e.g. 1, 10, 11 and 12) include some open-ended items in which respondents are instructed to explain their answers to the structured items.

The questionnaire was piloted on a group of fifteen students with the same profile as the students who participated in the study (see section 'Participants'). The students were instructed to answer the questionnaire and underline the words or expressions they might find difficult or unclear. Based on their feedback, the decision was made to explain the terms 'peer feedback', 'oral feedback' and 'online feedback' used in question 2 as they seemed unfamiliar to some respondents.

### **Teachers' Interview**

The interview is divided into two sections and is very similar to the students' questionnaire (see Appendix 2). The main difference relates to the nature of the questions used in each instrument. The interview includes open-ended questions as it was designed for a deeper exploration of the teachers' feedback practices at the ISLT. Some of the questions, however, include some structured items in which participants are instructed to choose from a list of options. The first section consists of five demographic questions about the respondents' gender, affiliation, position, teaching experience and training in teaching writing. The second comprises twelve questions about (a) the type of feedback provided by the teachers, (b) the type of feedback preferred by the students, (c) the teachers' feedback focuses, and (d) feedback explicitness on error correction.

### **Document Analysis**

Document analysis was used to collect information on the type of written feedback provided by these EFL writing teachers. Samples of students' essays were scrutinised in terms of type and quality of the written feedback provided by the teachers. Sixty essays were collected from three groups taught by three different teachers (see Table 6.2).

**Table 6.2** The students' essays analysed for the study

	Number of essays	Level	Topic
Teacher 1	20	1st year	Media
Teacher 2	20	3rd year	Education
Teacher 3	20	3rd year	Values

**Table 6.3** General profile of the questionnaire respondents

	Gender		Level	
	Male	Female	1st year	3rd year
Number of participants	15	106	65	56

## Participants

The study included 121 EFL students enrolled in the first and third year of the Bachelor's degree in English Language, Literature and Civilisation at the ISLT. Only first-year and third-year students participated in the study. Second-year students were not included due to the unavailability of a writing course in the second-year syllabus. As can be seen in Table 6.3, the majority of participants were females, and this could be considered representative of the target population since female students in the Tunisian higher education institutions far outnumber their male counterparts.

The study also included seven writing teachers. Table 6.4 shows that all teachers had varying degrees of teaching experience. Five teachers had more than fifteen years of teaching experience; only two had less than five years. At the level of teaching position, the sample included three secondary school teachers working in higher education institutions, two *professeurs agrégés* and one lecturer. In terms of training in EFL writing, four teachers reported that they had received training sessions in EFL writing. When reporting the study results, the seven teachers who responded to the interview were attributed the pseudonyms of respondent 1 to respondent 7. The three teachers who corrected the students' sample essays were referred to as teacher 1, teacher 2 and teacher 3.

The current study abided by British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines. All the participants in the study were informed that their responses would only be used for research purposes. They were

Table 6.4 General profile of the interview respondents

	Gender		Teaching experience				Position			Training in EFL writing	
	Male	Female	<5	5–9	10–15	>15	PES <sup>a</sup>	Agrégé <sup>b</sup>	Lecturer		Assistant professor
Number of participants	–	7	2	–	3	2	3	2	2	–	4

<sup>a</sup>PES: Stands for 'Professeur d'Enseignement Secondaire' which means English secondary school teacher. These teachers are generally trained as high school teachers, but they are recruited by the Ministry of Higher Education for a specific period of time

<sup>b</sup>Professeur agrégé: Refers to high school teachers who are recruited by the ministry of higher education after passing a national exam called 'agrégation'



also informed that the findings of the study would be published in an academic article of which they would be able to obtain a copy. They were also told that each participant could withdraw at any time and that his/her rights to confidentiality and anonymity would be respected as no reference to his/her name or identity would be made when reporting the study results.

## Data Analysis

The present study relied on quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data consisted of the students' answers to the structured items of the questionnaire. They were statistically analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (SPSS, version 22). The qualitative data included (a) the teacher's responses to the interview, (b) the students' responses to the open-ended items in the questionnaire and (c) the student's essays. The teachers and students' responses were grouped, examined and coded according to certain categories. The analysis of the students' essays followed the same procedure. The teachers' written comments on the students' performance were examined, coded and grouped into a set of predetermined categories and then used to answer certain parts of the research questions.

## Findings

### Background in Teaching EFL Writing

The analysis of the teachers' responses to the demographic items in the questionnaire revealed that no respondent had any training in teaching EFL writing to university students. Even though four teachers reported that they had training in EFL writing, the analysis of the information provided about these training sessions showed that they were in fact targeted to secondary school teachers and were not specifically focused on writing since they included other skills such as reading, listening and speaking. The apparent lack of the teachers' formal training in teaching

EFL writing to university students raises questions about their practices in writing classes in general and their chosen feedback practices in particular.

## Feedback Practices

The provision of feedback seems to be a regular practice for ISLT writing teachers. When asked about feedback provision in writing classes, 95% of the students mentioned that their teachers had provided them with feedback on the paragraphs or essays they had written for the writing course. The teachers interviewed confirmed this finding; all of them reported that they provided feedback to their students on a regular basis.

## Feedback Types

Table 6.5 summarises the students' responses to the question about the types of feedback they had received by the writing teachers at the ISLT. As can be seen in the table, written feedback is by far the most common type of feedback, selected by 84% of the respondents, followed by oral feedback (40%) and peer feedback (19%). Online feedback was the least used with only 12% of the students indicating that their teachers used this type in their writing classes.

Teachers' responses seem to be in line with these findings. In response to a question about the type of feedback they provided to their students, all respondents reported that they mainly relied on written comments

**Table 6.5** Types of feedback provided by ISLT teachers

Type of feedback	Number of students <sup>a</sup>	Percentage <sup>b</sup>
Written feedback	99	84
Peer feedback	22	19
Oral feedback	47	40
Online feedback	14	12

<sup>a</sup>Refers to the number of students who reported that their teachers used the type of feedback in their writing courses

<sup>b</sup>Each percentage is calculated out of a total of 121 respondents

**Table 6.6** Types of feedback preferred by ISLT students

Type of feedback	Number of students	Percentage <sup>a</sup>
Written feedback	91	75
Peer feedback	26	21
Oral feedback	64	53
Online feedback	33	27

<sup>a</sup>Each percentage is calculated out of a total of 121 respondents

and to a lesser degree on oral feedback. Three respondents mentioned that, in addition to written and oral feedback, they also used peer feedback and two other respondents reported that they used online feedback, especially with third-year and Master's students. Respondent 3 mentioned that she always uses a combination of written and oral feedback in which "*written comments are accompanied by oral feedback for more clarification.*"

In relation to the types of feedback preferred by the students, the analysis of the students' responses revealed results which are similar to the ones about the types of feedback provided by the teachers. Table 6.6 shows that written feedback was the most preferred as it was selected by 75% of the students, followed by oral feedback (53%) and online feedback (27%). Peer feedback was the least preferred as it was selected only by 21% of the respondents.

In response to the question about the type of feedback preferred by their students, all teachers said that their students mainly preferred written comments and oral feedback. Some of them explained that their students often asked for oral feedback to obtain more information about their performances. Respondent 4 explained that "*most students prefer written comments. They, however, ask for oral feedback if they are not convinced with the written comments or when they ask for clarification.*" Peer feedback did not seem to be preferred by many students. Only respondent 7 referred to this type of feedback. She explained that some of her students did not actively participate in peer feedback sessions as "*they are not willing to hear the evaluation of their peers.*" As for online feedback, respondent 6 reported that only Master's students asked for this type of feedback.

**Table 6.7** Teachers' feedback focuses

Aspects	Number of students	Percentage <sup>a</sup>
Language errors	72	60
General aspects (organisation, ideas, style, etc.)	85	70
Overall writing performance	59	49

<sup>a</sup>Each percentage is calculated out of a total of 121 respondents

## Feedback Focus

When asked about teachers' feedback focuses in the questionnaire, students provided a variety of responses (see Table 6.7). 70% of them indicated that their teachers mainly focused on general aspects of writing such as organisation, style, development of ideas, coherence and unity, 60% mentioned language errors and 49% referred to overall writing performance as the major focus of the teachers' feedback.

Teachers provided different responses concerning the aspects they focused on in their feedback. Four respondents reported that they focused on language errors, general aspects of the writing and overall writing performance. They explained that the focus on these aspects stems from their concern about providing students with complete information about their performance. Respondents 1 and 5 said that they mainly focused on language errors in their feedback because they were primarily concerned with the accuracy of the students' performance. Respondent 5 commented that "*the errors in grammar or vocab affect the quality of the academic writing.*" Respondent 3, on the other hand, mentioned that she only focused on the general aspects of the writing because "*organisation, structure or quality of ideas are the most important aspects in essay writing.*"

The analysis of the teachers' feedback on the students' essays revealed that the teachers mainly focused on language errors in their comments. Table 6.8 shows that 82% of the comments were about the language errors in the essays, 16% about the general aspects of the essays and only 3% about the overall writing performance. The table also shows considerable differences between the three teachers in terms of the amount and focus of feedback. In terms of the amount of feedback, teacher 2 provided about half (48%) of all the comments made by the three teachers.

**Table 6.8** Teachers' feedback focuses (students' essays)

Aspects	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Total
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Comments about language errors	75 (16)	269 (64)	120 (26)	464 (82)
Comments about general aspects (organisation, ideas, style, etc.)	30 (31)	10 (10)	55 (58)	95 (16)
Comments about overall writing performance	7 (63)	0 (0)	4 (36)	11 (3)
Total (%)	112 (20)	279 (64)	179 (31)	570 (100)

Teachers 3 provided 31%, and teacher 1 provided only 20% of the comments. At the level of feedback focus, while teacher 2 provided 64% of all the comments made about language errors, she only provided 10% of all the comments made about the general aspects and no comments at all about the overall writing performance. The other two teachers, however, provided a balanced amount of comments across the three types of feedback.

### Feedback on Error Correction

When reporting the teachers' practices when dealing with language errors, the students mentioned 'underlining errors' and to a lesser extent 'writing a code referring to the error type' as the most common practices. Table 6.9 shows that 77% of the students reported that their teachers mainly underlined their errors, 41% said that their teacher wrote a code referring to the error type and only 22% mentioned that their teacher included the full correction of the error in their feedback.

The analysis of the teachers' responses indicated that underlining errors and writing full correction were the most common teachers' feedback practices when dealing with language errors. Four respondents reported that they mainly underlined errors which are 'too evident', but when the errors were more complex, they wrote the full correction to help the students learn the correct use of the language. Respondents 2 and 4 mentioned that they wrote a code referring to the error type to push the students "*reflect on their mistakes.*" Respondent 6 said that she relied on

**Table 6.9** Error correction practices

Practice	Number of students	Percentage <sup>a</sup>
Underline errors	92	77
Write a code referring to the error type	49	41
Write full correction of error	27	22

<sup>a</sup>Each percentage is calculated out of a total of 121 respondents

**Table 6.10** Error correction practices (students' essays)

Aspects	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Total
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Underline language errors	23 (10)	129 (55)	82 (35)	234 (50)
Write a code	5 (50)	3 (30)	2 (20)	10 (3)
Write full correction	47 (21)	137 (62)	36 (16)	220 (47)
Total (%)	75 (16)	269 (58)	120 (26)	464 (100)

the three practices in her feedback. She explained that “*my choice of which practice to use usually depends on seriousness of the error and the level of the students I am teaching.*”

The results of the analysis of the teachers' feedback on the students' essays seem to confirm these findings. Table 6.10 shows that 50% of the teacher's comments about language errors consisted in underlining the errors, 47% consisted in writing full correction of the errors, and only 3% of the comments included writing a code which referred to the error type. The table also reveals significant differences between the teachers in terms the amount of comments provided about language errors. While teacher 2 provided 58% of all the comments made about language errors, teacher 1 provided only 16% of the comments.

## Feedback on General Aspects of Writing

The general aspects that teachers focus on in their feedback relate to aspects of writing which include organisation, style, development of ideas, quality of ideas, coherence and unity. Table 6.11 provides a summary of the students' responses to the item about these aspects in the questionnaire. The students reported that their teachers' general comments focused mainly on coherence (79%), development of ideas (72%)

**Table 6.11** Feedback on general aspects

Aspects	Number of students	Percentage <sup>a</sup>
Organisation	79	66
Style	37	31
Development of ideas	86	72
Quality of ideas	34	28
Coherence	95	79
Unity	51	42

<sup>a</sup>Each percentage is calculated out of a total of 121 respondents

and organisation (66%). Smaller numbers of students mentioned other aspects which include unity (42%) and, to a lesser extent, style (31%) and quality of ideas (28%).

When asked about the general aspects they focus on when providing feedback on the students' writings, all teachers mentioned that they focus on organisation, style, development of ideas, quality of ideas, coherence and unity. Most of them explained that all these general aspects are important as they help them make their students better writers. In their comments about the importance they attributed to these aspects, most respondents considered organisation, development of ideas and coherence as the most important. Less importance, however, was given to unity and style.

The analysis of the teachers' comments on the students' essays revealed that the main aspects teachers focused on included organisation (39% of the comments), style (29%) and development of ideas (18%). Very little focus was placed on unity and coherence. Table 6.12 shows significant differences between the teachers' amount of focus on general aspects of their feedback. While teacher 3 provided more than 58% of all the comments about the general aspects of the essays, teacher 2 provided only 10% of those comments.

## Feedback on Overall Writing Performance

The feedback on overall writing performance generally included encouraging remarks meant to motivate the students or critical remarks meant to push the students to reflect on their performance. Table 6.13 provides

**Table 6.12** Feedback on general aspects (students' essays)

Aspects	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Total No. (%)
Organisation	18	6	13	37 (39)
Style	4	2	22	28 (29)
Development of ideas	2	–	15	17 (18)
Quality of ideas	5	2	4	11 (11)
Coherence	–	–	–	– (–)
Unity	1	–	1	2 (0.5)
Total	30 (31)	10 (10.5)	55 (58.5)	95 (100)
No. (%)				

**Table 6.13** Nature of teachers' comments

Comment type	Number of students <sup>a</sup>	Percentage <sup>a</sup>
Encouraging remarks	8	7
Critical comments	58	50
Both	51	43

<sup>a</sup>Each percentage is calculated out of a total of 121 respondents

a summary of the responses to an item about the nature of teacher's feedback in the questionnaire. About 50% of the students mentioned that their teachers' comments were mainly critical, 43% reported that the comments were both encouraging and critical and only 7% described their teachers' comments as encouraging.

All teachers reported that they used both encouraging and critical comments. In their responses, they emphasised the importance of the provision of positive reinforcement to build the students' self-confidence and critical comments to help them focus on their errors. Respondent 3 mentioned that she provided here students with both encouraging and critical comments. She explained that "*by giving them encouraging remarks, I motivate them to write more. Critical comments make the students aware of the errors that they have made while writing.*"

Table 6.14 summarises the main findings about the nature of the feedback provided by the teachers on the students' essays. Almost two-thirds (64%) of the teachers' feedback about the overall writing performance consisted of critical comments which focused on the students' errors and included remarks such as "*serious problems of the organisation,*" "*poor*



**Table 6.14** Nature of teachers' comments (students' essays)

Aspects	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Total No. (%)
Encouraging remarks	6	–	6	12 (35)
Critical comments	11	–	11	22 (64)
Total No. (%)	17 (50)	–	17 (50)	34 (100)

*development of ideas*” or even offending comments such as “*is this English?*” Encouraging remarks represented only 35% of the teachers’ general feedback and included comments meant to motivate the students such as “*you can do much better,*” “*interesting ideas and clear outline*” or “*excellent work.*” Significant differences also exist between the teachers’ use of these types of general comments. While teachers 1 and 3 provided an equal percentage of critical and encouraging remarks (50% each), teacher 2 provided none of these types of remarks about the students’ overall writing performance.

### Feedback Responsiveness to Learners’ Needs

This point relates to the degree of sensitivity of the teachers’ feedback to the student’s needs. As can be seen in Table 6.15, 57% of the students reported that their teachers customised their feedback based on what they knew about the students’ background, needs and performances, while 43% indicated that their teachers provided the same feedback to all students.

When asked about the responsiveness of the feedback they provided to their students, all teachers reported that they customised the feedback they provided based on what they knew about the profiles of their students. In their responses, they provided general statements about the importance of taking into account the students’ background, needs and performances. Respondent 2 commented that “*every single student should feel that the teacher is caring for his/her writing and taking into consideration his/her individuality.*”

The close examination of the teachers’ comments on the students’ essays seemed to indicate that those comments were not often customised

**Table 6.15** Responsiveness of feedback to learners' needs

Type of feedback	Number of students	Percentage <sup>a</sup>
Same feedback to all students	50	43
Customised feedback	58	57

<sup>a</sup>Each percentage is calculated out of a total of 108 respondents

to the students' needs. The feedback provided by teacher 1 and teacher 2 was mainly centred on the correction of the student's language errors. Little efforts were made to provide information about each student's specific problems. Teacher 3, however, provided more comments about the students' overall writing performance. Some of these comments included reference to the students' specific problems and the ways to deal with those problems.

### Discussion of Feedback with Students

A majority (87%) of the students reported that their teachers allowed them to react and respond to the feedback they provided. Only 13% mentioned that their teachers did not discuss the feedback they provided with them. When asked whether they allow their students to react to their feedback, all teachers mentioned that they regularly discussed their feedback with their students. Most of them explained that this practice not only increases the students' awareness of the mistakes they might make in the future but also increases their readiness to learn from the feedback as they become more convinced by the teachers' comments. Respondent 6 explained that "*by discussing the feedback, students become more involved in the writing process and they become more aware of the possible errors that they may make in their future writing performance.*"

### Effects of Feedback

In their responses to the question about the effects of feedback, the students seemed to be aware of the positive effects of feedback on their future performance. Over two-thirds (70%) said that it has considerable effects, 26% mentioned that it has some effects and only 3% thought

that feedback has little or no effects. Teachers' responses seemed to be in line with the students' opinions about the effect of feedback. All of them highlighted the positive effects of feedback on the students' future performance. Three respondents focused on the immediate effects of teachers' comments as they would help learners identify and correct the mistakes they make in their writings. Respondent 1 and 4 were mainly concerned with the intermediate effects of feedback. Respondent 4 emphasised that teachers' comments "*help students improve their future performance as they raise their awareness to their errors and encourage them to avoid them in the future.*"

## Beliefs Informing Feedback Practices

The data collected about feedback practices at the ISLT did not only provide insights about how teachers provide feedback, but it also served as a source of information about the theories and beliefs which informed those practices. The analysis of the data collected for the study revealed that teachers' feedback practices were governed to an extent by theoretical knowledge and beliefs about feedback provision in writing classes. This knowledge and beliefs were probably acquired during the teachers' university studies, from their experiences as writing teachers and/or from the readings they had done for the course.

In terms of theoretical knowledge, the study showed that the teachers were familiar with all the different types of feedback. In addition, most of them were also knowledgeable about the characteristics of each type and the context in which it should be used. For instance, while some teachers mentioned that online feedback is more effective with students who are at advanced levels, other teachers reported that they often used a combination of written and oral feedback to maximise the effect on the students' writing performance. Teachers also seemed to possess some knowledge about the different aspects on which they should focus in their feedback. Most of their feedback consisted of comments on different aspects of writing which focused on language errors, general aspects of writing such as organisation, style, ideas, coherence and unity, and the students' overall writing performance. In relation to error correction, the

study also revealed that the teachers were, to a certain extent, knowledgeable about the different techniques used in error correction. When dealing with the students' errors, they used techniques which included underlining errors, writing a code referring to the error type or writing the full correction of the errors. Some teachers even mentioned that their choice of the error correction technique was often based on the type and the seriousness of the students' error.

Regarding beliefs about feedback provision, the study revealed that ISLT writing teachers' practices were informed by some beliefs about the role of feedback in writing instruction and the nature of the feedback to be provided. Most teachers seemed to be aware of the importance of regular feedback provision in writing instruction. All of them mentioned that they provided feedback to their students on a regular basis. They also seemed to be aware of the types of feedback preferred by their students and most of their practices seemed to be in line with those preferences. The data collected also showed that teachers appeared to be fully aware of the role of positive feedback in building students' self-confidence. In their responses to the interview, all of them reported that they regularly motivated their students with encouraging feedback. Teachers also seemed to be aware of the importance of taking into account students' differences in feedback provision. Most of them reported that they customised their feedback according to their students' individual needs.

The teachers' knowledge and beliefs about feedback practices seem to have their roots in two major approaches to language learning and writing instruction. Teachers' beliefs about the importance of regular feedback provision and the role of feedback in improving the learners' writing performance could be traced back to the 'process approach' to writing in which writing is perceived as a formative process in which the writing skill is improved through the regular provision of information on the learner's actual performance. Teachers' assumptions about the learners' differences and their effects on feedback provision seemed to root in the 'learner-centred approach' to language teaching in which each learner is treated as a separate individual who has specific needs and learning styles. These specific needs have to be taken into consideration when designing classroom tasks or selecting the teaching method to be used in the classroom.

## Conclusions and Discussion

The present study explored the feedback practices of Tunisian EFL writing teachers at the ISLT. Analysis of the data collected from the students' questionnaires, teachers' interviews and students' essays leads to two major conclusions about how ISLT teachers delivered feedback in their writing classes. First, teachers seemed to possess some theoretical knowledge about feedback provision (see section "[Beliefs Informing Feedback Practices](#)"). This knowledge was often translated into some classroom practices. Second, on some occasions and in relation to some aspects of feedback, teachers possessed the theoretical knowledge but failed to translate that knowledge into concrete instructional practices. Some of their practices were informed by certain traditional beliefs which confine the provision of feedback to the correction of students' errors. For instance, all teachers appeared to possess some knowledge about the different types of feedback and the context in which each type is used. The data showed, however, that the feedback they provided to their students was mainly confined to two types, namely written feedback and, to a lesser extent, oral feedback. In relation to the focuses of their feedback, all teachers mentioned that they focused on all the aspects of writing which include language errors, general aspects of writing and overall writing performance. However, the analysis of the teachers' comments on the students' essays showed that almost all these comments were centred on error correction.

The present study also highlighted some significant differences between the teachers' feedback practices in terms of the amount and focus of feedback provided. Some teachers were highly productive regarding feedback provision. Others, however, only provided a small number of comments on their students' essays. Some teachers focused their feedback on all the aspects of writing. They provided comments on the students' language errors, the general writing aspects and the overall writing performance. Other teachers, however, showed more concern with the accuracy of the students' performance. They only limited their comments to the correction of language errors.

These conclusions seem to indicate that most of the teachers who participated in the study adhere to the constructivist feedback paradigm (Knight & Yorke, 2003; Poulos & Mahony, 2008). Though not explicitly stated, the teachers' focus on the provision of written corrective feedback suggests that they adopt a view which considers feedback provision as a unidirectional process in which an expert, the teacher, supplies a passive recipient, the learner, with the correct forms of the language. In fact, teachers' accounts on the way they provided feedback together with the types of feedback they wrote on their students' essays included little reference to or examples of 'facilitative' feedback (Evans, 2013) that is built on interaction and meant to help students gain a new understanding of language use.

These conclusions would gain more importance if related to the issues and challenges of feedback provision in the higher education context, a context in which learners are considered as active participants in the learning process who need to be supplied with the necessary strategies to enhance their independence in the future. Ferguson (2011) stated that in higher education, feedback is perceived as a means to facilitate the development of students as independent learners who are able assess and regulate their own learning process and prepare them for the tasks they will perform after graduation. In the same line of thought, Black and McCormick (2010) contended that, in the higher education context, oral feedback is appropriate to the needs of the students as it ensures greater independence in learning. The present study, however, showed that feedback practices in this particular Tunisian higher education institution seem to be incongruent with the needs of university students and the challenges of feedback provision in the context of higher education. This points to an urgent need for improvement of feedback practices at the ISLT in particular and in other Tunisian higher education institutions in general. This improvement can be achieved through the provision of training programmes in EFL writing to help writing teachers consolidate their theoretical knowledge about feedback provision and align their practices with best feedback practices recommended in the literature or used in other international higher education institutions.

## Appendix 1

### Students' Questionnaire About Feedback Practices in EFL Writing Courses in Tunisia

This questionnaire aims to collect background information about the way your teacher provides feedback on the essays or paragraphs you write for the writing courses at the ISLT. Your answers are very important and will be strictly confidential.

Please fill in the information requested.

This questionnaire includes three pages and may take about 10 minutes if you answer all the questions. Please return it to the person who gave it to you.

Thank you for your cooperation.

**Section A: Biodata**

- 1- Gender: Female  Male
- 2- Institution (where you study): -----
- 3- Level : 1<sup>st</sup> year  2<sup>nd</sup> year  3<sup>rd</sup> year

**Section B: feedback practices**

1- Does your writing teacher provide feedback on the paragraphs/essays you write?

Yes  No

- a) If yes, please move to questions 2- 11 below.
- b) If no, please explain the reason(s) in the space provided.

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-----

2- Tick the option(s) which refer(s) to the **type of feedback** provided by your teacher.

• When you teacher provides feedback on your paragraphs/essays, does s/he	√
- <b>write comments</b> on your paragraphs/essays?	
- organise <b>peer feedback</b> sessions in which you comment on your classmates' paragraphs/essays?	
- organise <b>oral feedback</b> sessions in which s/he discusses the written feedback provided to you?	
- provide <b>online feedback</b> to you through computer-mediated communication such as emails, forums or social media?	

3- Tick the option(s) which refer(s) to the **type(s) of feedback** you **prefer**

• Which type(s) of <b>feedback</b> do you <b>prefer</b> ?	√
- Written feedback	
- Peer feedback (commenting on your classmates' paragraphs/essays)	
- Oral group discussion of written feedback	
- Online feedback (through emails, forums or social media)	

4- Tick the option(s) which refer(s) to the **aspect(s)** that your teacher **focuses on** in his/her feedback.

• When your teacher writes feedback on your paragraphs/essays, does s/he focus on:	√
- language errors?	
- general aspects of the writing such as organisation, quality of ideas and style?	
- the overall writing performance?	



- 5- Tick the option(s) which best describe(s) the **degree of explicitness** of your teacher's feedback.

• When you teacher provides feedback on your language errors, does s/he	√
- underline the errors?	
- write a code which refers to the error type (example: <b>gr.</b> for grammar, <b>voc.</b> for vocabulary)?	
- write the full correction of the error?	

- 6- Tick the option(s) which refer(s) to the **general aspect(s)** that you teacher **focuses on** in his/her feedback.

• When you teacher provides feedback on the general aspects of your paragraphs/essays, does s/he focus on	√
- organization?	
- style?	
- development of ideas?	
- quality of ideas?	
- coherence?	
- unity?	

- 7- Tick the **option** which refers to the **type of comments** your teacher provides in his/her feedback.

• When your teacher comments on your overall writing performance, does s/he provide	√
- encouraging remarks?	
- critical comments?	
- both?	

- 8- Tick the option which refers to the **type of feedback** provided by your teacher.

• When your teacher provides feedback on your paragraphs/essays, does s/he	√
- provide the same feedback to all students?	
- customise his/her feedback based on what s/he knows about your background, needs and performance?	

9- How often does your teacher use **peer feedback** (letting you comment on your classmates' paragraphs/essays)?

Never  Almost never  Sometimes  Often  Always

10- Does your teacher allow you to **react and provide your responses** to his/her feedback?

Yes  No

If no, please explain why?

-----  
-----

11- Does your writing teacher provide **online feedback** on the paragraphs/essays you write?

Yes  No

a) If yes, please explain how?

-----  
-----

b) If no, please explain why?

-----  
-----

12- Do you think that the provision of feedback may have a **positive effect** on your future writing performance?

No effect  
Very little effect  
Some effect  
Considerable effect

√

**Thank you for your cooperation**

## Appendix 2

### Teachers' Structured Interview About Feedback Practices in EFL Writing Courses in Tunisia

This interview aims to collect background information about the way you provide feedback on your students' writings. Your answers are very important and will be strictly confidential. Please fill in the information requested.

This questionnaire includes three pages and may take about 10 minutes if you answer all the questions. Please return it to the person who gave it to you.

Thank you for your cooperation.

**Section A: Biodata**

- 1- Institution (where you work): -----
  - 2- Position : PES Détaché  Assistant  Maître assistant  Maître de conférences
  - 3- Total number of years of experience as an EFL writing teacher: -----.
  - 4- Gender: Female  Male
- As a teacher, have you ever had a training course in EFL writing?  
 Yes  No
- If yes, please specify the place, focus, and length-----  
 -----

**Section B: Feedback Practices**

- 1- Do you provide feedback on the paragraphs/essays that your students write for the writing course? Yes  No
- c) If yes, please answer questions 2- 11 below.
- d) If no, please explain the reason(s) in the space provided.  
 -----  
 -----  
 -----
- 2- What type of feedback do you provide to your students (e.g., written comments, peer feedback, oral feedback or online feedback)?  
 -----  
 -----  
 -----
- 3- Which type(s) of feedback is (are) preferred by your students?  
 -----  
 -----  
 -----
- 4- When you write your feedback on your students' paragraphs/essays, which aspects do you focus on?

	√
- language errors?	
- general aspects of the writing such as organisation, quality of ideas and style?	
- the overall writing performance?	

- Please specify why you focus on such aspects.

-----

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5- When you provide feedback on your students' language errors, do you

(You can tick more than one option)

- underline the errors?	<input type="checkbox"/>
- write a code which refers to the error type (e.g., gr., voc., sp., str.)?	<input type="checkbox"/>
- write the full correction of the error?	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Please justify your choice.

-----

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-----

6- When you provide feedback on the general aspects of the paragraphs/essays, do you focus on

(You can tick more than one option)

- organization?	<input type="checkbox"/>
- style?	<input type="checkbox"/>
- development of ideas?	<input type="checkbox"/>
- quality of ideas?	<input type="checkbox"/>
- coherence?	<input type="checkbox"/>
- unity?	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Please explain why you focus on such aspects.

-----

-----

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7- When you comment on the overall writing performance of your students, do you provide

(Please tick only one option)

- encouraging remarks?	<input type="checkbox"/>
- critical comments?	<input type="checkbox"/>
- both?	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Please justify your choice.

-----

-----

-----

8- When you provide your feedback on your students' writings, do you

(Please tick only one option)

	√
- provide the same feedback to all students?	
- customise your feedback based on what you know about the student's background, needs and performances?	

- Please justify your choice.

-----

-----

-----

9- How often do you rely on **peer feedback** in your writing classes?

Never     Almost never     Sometimes     Often     Always

10- Do you allow your students to **react and respond** to your feedback?

Yes     No

If yes, please explain how?

-----

-----

If no, please explain why?

-----

-----

11- Do you provide **online feedback** on the paragraphs/essays your students write on the writing course?

Yes     No

If yes, please explain how?

-----

-----

If no, please explain why?

-----

-----

12- Do you think that the provision of feedback may have a **positive effect** on your students' future writing performance?

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**Thank you for your cooperation**

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