Teachers' Electronic Feedback on First Year Students' EFL Writing at a Saudi University: Issues and Implications

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Abstract
This study explores the experiences of English language teachers (ELTs) in providing written feedback on their students' writing via a digital platform in their first year at a Saudi university. The purpose of this exploratory study is to identify: (a) the nature of the electronic feedback that ELTs provide on students' writing; i.e. positive vs negative, (b) the focus of ELTs' e-feedback, (c) the amount of ELTs' feedback. 120 First Year College students and four EFL teachers participated in this study. The e-feedback submitted by these four ELTs was qualitatively analyzed. The analysis indicates that most of the ELTs' e-feedback were general and brief. In addition, the focus of their e-feedback was mainly on grammar and vocabulary. Interestingly, the ELTs tend to give positive e-feedback. The study concludes with providing some implications for effective feedback.

Key words: e-feedback, writing, English language teachers, first year students
Introduction
Writing is undoubtedly one of the basic key skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) especially for university students who should study all subjects in English because it empowers them to communicate their thoughts, ideas, feelings and expressions. Therefore, writing skills are vital in higher education as well as for the real arena of work that students hope to enter after education. This importance has been confirmed in practice by previous EFL writing researchers (Alvira, 2016; Chang, 2011; Rao, 2017).
Weigle (2002) states that when students move to higher education, the ability to write effectively becomes much more important. Contrary to the compulsory schooling, at the varsity level, writing is regarded not only as a standard means of communication but also as a vital means of learning. When learners have acquired expertise in writing, it is regarded as an evidence that they have mastered the cognitive skills essential for university tasks (p. 5). Alvira (2016) maintains that writing is important for the enhancement of their language and higher thinking skills at the university level. Moreover, several studies have revealed a connection between low writing skills and number of dropouts from university studies. This was confirmed by Geiser and Studley (2001) who state that students’ success in course work mainly depends on their ability to compose an extended text. Therefore, developing a mechanism of giving appropriate feedback is necessary to help students improve their writing skills consistently (Alvira, 2016).
Hence, it has been reported that giving (written) feedback and commenting on students’ performance helps in consolidating and reinforcing what they have learnt. Therefore, many researchers, such as Race (2001), state that, as in all educational fields, feedback (especially) on writing plays a crucial role in teaching writing.
The present study investigates the nature, amount and focus of English language teachers’ (ELTs) electronic feedback given on students’ writings delivered via a digital platform called Oxford IQ of a University English Language Course entitled Q: skills for Success published by Oxford University Press (OUP). In this course students are required to submit their writing assignments via this platform which enables teachers to send their own written corrective feedback to students online as well.

Review of Literature
In order to provide a context for the present study, some important ideas and findings from previous researches on traditional and electronic written corrective feedback is provided here.
Nearly all research agrees, according to Burke and Pieterick (2010), that teachers should be cautious and aware of the extent of their own control over students' writings when giving them their e-feedback because it can shape good writers. So, the nature and amount of feedback should be taken into consideration carefully. This implies the importance of giving written corrective feedback to students' writing.

One of the famous models of corrective feedback and that is widely used is Nicol and Macfarlane’s (2006). They propose that corrective written feedback can be used as a way to develop students' self-regulation. Therefore, they have offered six ways to support effective student learning through feedback:

1- It helps students understand what good performance is,
2- It helps students learn how to self-assess, how to direct their learning, and how to help other learners,
3- It offers students an opportunity to take corrective measures according to the given feedback,
4- It enlightens students about their own learning,
5- It helps form learning communities, and
6- It supports positive beliefs and self-confidence.

Moreover, Hattie and Timperley (2007) suggest four levels of feedback through their own model: feedback that focuses on task, feedback that focuses on process, feedback about self-regulation and feedback about the person. Out of these four, according to them, the feedback that focuses on process and task is the most effective. Other feedbacks may distract the students' attention from learning objectives.

This was assured by Brookhart (2008) who suggests that a teacher should present written feedback in such a way that a student can hears what the teacher intends. Teachers need to carefully choose expressions to show that they value the student as a learner in order to help them identify themselves as a scholar (self-efficacy), active and strategic in managing their learning (self-regulation). He suggests that effective written feedback should be clear, specific and respectful to students' different language levels. Teachers need to make their students understand feedback well by using simple vocabulary in their comments. Comments should be not too narrow, not too broad, but just right and specific. Broad comments like 'write more' and "try harder" cannot guide students well. Using precise expressions in feedback is helpful. Comments such as "This is great!" sounds nice, but is unluckily 'vague', as it does not specify anything. A more detailed and specific comments such as "The introductory part of your essay
is great!" is certainly better. In addition, the tone of teachers' written or oral feedback is important. It can inspire or discourage. Students should feel that their teacher respects their identity. It should inspire thought, curiosity or wondering.

Increasingly, Shute (2008, p. 9) states that task corrective formative feedback should be timely and specific about learners' responses to a particular task. It is recommended that feedback be genuine, supportive, non-evaluative, and credible. It should take learners' ability and level of understanding into consideration, and it should relate to other variables such as aspects of the task. She gives general guidelines for formative feedback. Some of them are as follows:

(Table 1: guidelines for successful written feedback)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Things to do</th>
<th>Things to avoid</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on task</td>
<td>Avoid normative comparisons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide elaborated feedback</td>
<td>Avoid giving overall grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be specific and clear</td>
<td>Avoid discouraging feedback that dampens learning spirit and damages learners’ self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be as simple as possible</td>
<td>Use 'praise' sparingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give objective and impartial feedback, preferably typed on computer</td>
<td>Keep use of extensive error analysis and diagnose to a minimum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aim at promoting a learning goal orientation, rather than performance</td>
<td>Do not confine the feedback to text. Use visual and acoustic options, as well.</td>
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Electronic Feedback (EFB) can be positive as well as negative. Positive EFB, such as 'Good' or 'Yes' indicates that student's writing is correct, i.e. This positive feedback, according to Ellis (2009), fosters students' motivation towards learning EFL/ESL. Contrary to this, negative feedback is corrective in order to fix errors, i.e. poor writing. Such comments may encourage or discourage students as mentioned before. This means that feedback has emotional impacts on students. Hence, if the feedback is too negative, it may demotivate students and, as a result, the teacher's feedback may not be acted upon. Also, excessive admiration may be misleading, resulting in confusion, and/or demotivation. Therefore, a balance between both sides might be better.

The amount of EFB is another important point that has been discussed by researchers. Teachers should decide on how much their own EFB should be; whether to focus on few
specific errors (i.e. selective) or to indicate all errors (i.e. comprehensive). Many researchers (e.g. Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Lee, 2013) are in favour of selective EFB. They oppose marking all errors because, in their opinion, it is more important to improve student's self-editing skills (i.e. process writing) than the quality of the final shape of the writing. In addition, selective EFB is less strenuous for teachers to analyze, process, and apply (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). On the other hand, Evans et al. (2010) are for comprehensive EFB because we should be after accuracy and perfection in order to teach students how to be editors of their own writings. Therefore, researchers found that they should reach a middle ground in which teachers correct specific but several error categories instead of a few errors.

Another important point that teachers face is to decide what type(s) of errors should be focused upon. As we know there are serious, minor, frequent, infrequent and stigmatizing errors. Serious errors are those that cause breakdown of communication. However, minor errors never obscure comprehensibility of the writing text. Frequent errors are those that the learners frequently make but stigmatizing errors are those by which we identify the student having poor writing proficiency (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012, p. 146). Lee (2013) claims that teachers are usually more concerned about frequent and stigmatizing errors.

Chang (2011) has mentioned that the traditional ways of giving and getting feedback, which is the usual practice in a conventional face-to-face setting, may not always meet the students’ expectations in a satisfactory manner. To enable quick feedback delivery, educational institutions employ electronic communication channels, such as email, learning management systems (LMS), etc. It is electronic written feedback.

Electronic feedback (EFB), which is defined by Chang (2011) as “comments and responses that an instructor provides to students’ written assignments or learning activities submitted via the Internet in the assessment process”, allows users to customize teaching and learning according to their individual choices, as it is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, irrespective of time, location, or learning style. In fact, the email or Learning Management Systems (LMS), such as blackboard, Canvas, Microsoft Team, Edmodo, Moodle, and Zoom are capable of conveying quick feedback that meets students’ expectations. Language instructors are capable of responding to submission of assignments at a pace much better than before thanks to the advances in computer technology because EFL Students nowadays need individualized support from instructors, immediate feedback that promotes their learning effectively, helps them build ideas, and assists them in meeting learning objectives. Therefore, e-feedback comes to be as an individualized scaffolding that is necessary and effective in
today's world (Chang, 2011; Elola & Oskoz, 2017; Laurillard, 2002; MacDonald & Twining, 2002; Peat & Franklin, 2002).

In the feedback literature, it has been established that if an assignment is returned without any comments on it, it is generally regarded as the worst feedback that a student may receive, simply because the feedback has nothing for the student to act upon and, therefore, it does not help students improve their writing. However, lengthy feedback is equally problematic for the learners to digest and act on (Burke & Pieterick, 2010).

In a study, Chang (2011) tried to find out the support of students regarding a method employed by a university lecturer in which detailed e-feedback was instantly provided on the online assessments of students. The researcher also evaluated the usefulness of e-feedback on the learning process of students. Most of the students were found to be in favour of the e-feedback system and rendered it convenient, immediate, and helpful. According to them, the e-feedback enhanced their thinking ability, helped them in knowing if they were “on the right track,” boosted their education by correction as well as reflection, and supported their writing and time management abilities.

Alkhatib’s (2015) study that investigated the beliefs and practices of writing teacher with respect to written corrective feedback (WCF) at a Saudi university revealed both congruence and tensions between their beliefs and practices. Teachers' beliefs were in consistency with their practices about the focus and amount of WCF. On the contrary, their beliefs about the use of positive feedback were inconsistent. Students' preferences regarding the focus of WCF and the provision of positive feedback were not in accordance with teachers’ practices.

A research based on action was performed by Alvira (2016) on the students of a medium size private university of Colombia. Certain strategies were designed to know the feedback of students of ‘English as a foreign language’ by employing screencasting- a web tool (2.0). The usage of oral, written, and coded feedback was found to be acceptable by the majority of students. The results indicated the positive role of web tool for improving the paragraph level writing skills of the students. The study concluded screencasting as a significant tool that provides motivation to students and enhances their level of comprehension.

Ene and Upton (2014) investigated teachers' electronic written feedback for determining two important aspects. The first one was to know the type of e-written feedback system that the students of ‘English as a Second Language’ adopt which can be submitted and reverted by electronic means. The second aspect was to investigate the correlation between the feedback of lecturer and student’s comprehension of the subject. The e-feedback of the lecturer
showed similarity with the handwritten one and mainly contain minimal remarks that were mostly systemic, explicit, directive, principled and was based on the requirement. The results demonstrated the importance of e-feedback in obtaining suitable reviews of the grammar as well as primary structures, and also on being content and organized. These findings suggested the significant effectiveness of e-feedback system which must not be neglected.

Farshi and Safa (2015) compared the effectiveness of two different kinds of corrective feedback system on the writing skills of ‘English as a Foreign Language’ students. For conducting this study, thirty-five advanced learning students were divided into three groups. Fourteen treatment sessions were designed to teach written text structures in all the three groups. A related subject matter was provided to the student in each treatment session and the students were instructed to write anything about it. The students of first group had to handover the assignment to the lecturer in the classroom only. The lecturer was intended to correct the assignment and give it back to the student in the next scheduled class. The students of second group were asked to prepare their topics on the electronic devices and send it to the teacher through email. The teacher also had to correct the assignment and send it back to the students along with the corrective comments via email. The students of third group (control group) were not provided with corrections for their written assignments. Also, it was on them to handover the assignment to the teacher directly in class or through email. The results indicated the effectiveness of both the traditional as well as electronic methods over control as both of these methods gained more score. While comparing the traditional feedback with the e-feedback, more score was obtained by the e-feedback and thus, the e-feedback method was said to be more profitable and significant than the traditional one.

Ene and Upton (2018) investigated the effectiveness of teachers’ electronic feedback (TEF) in second language writing skills both online and person to person classes. The electronic feedback from the teacher was provided in a nonsynchronous manner in the form of track changes and MS Word comments in e-drafts. The feedback was also provided synchronously as text messages between student and teacher. The results indicated that almost all the TEF was content-focused and positively attempted or implemented. Researchers concluded the effectiveness of TEF in ESL writing and also pointed out the reinforcement of nonsynchronous TEF with the help of synchronous TEF.

Currently, very limited number of research is present that is based on teacher’s electronic feedback. As per our knowledge, no research gives detailed information about the usage and impact of electronic feedback system on enhancing the writing skills of students in non-experimental Second Language Writing classes. Only few studies are conducted until now
that analyzes the methods used by electronic feedback systems as employed by teachers or tutors while conducting written communication with students in different discussion mediums (Ene & Upton, 2014).

It can be noticed that there are different focuses of feedback such as accuracy, some examine grammar correction, forms (e.g., nouns or syntax); other types may use coding, circling, or error description…etc. This indicates that researchers have different opinions about the effectiveness of feedback. Some scholars have observed that it has no role in language development (Truscott & Hsu, 2008). On the other hand, other researchers believe that it enhances students’ language skills in writing classes (Farshi & Safa, 2015; Saadi & Saadat, 2015; Sheen & Ellis, 2011).

According to Wihastyanang and Latief (2017), some previous findings showed that e-feedback had a greater impact on revision than oral feedback, in other words, e-feedback might be more useful. In addition, it helps L2 (and FL as well) writers focus on larger writing and create macro revisions as well. This is because it makes students see others’ responses, especially their teachers’, to their writing from which they learn, and become able to revise it in order to have a high-quality piece of writing at the end.

Some studies have found that students prefer language learning materials available electronically or online to the traditional hardcopies, as the former is easy to use and more engaging. Thus, these materials motivate the students in language learning. One of the participants, for instance, emphasized the advantages of these materials and said as we are in the age of technology, people are more interested in using electronic and online language learning resources than traditional paper and pencil ones. Moreover, e-feedback provides a stress-free environment for language learning. It is better than traditional feedback. Many students admitted that they did not prefer be corrected by their teacher in a face-to-face setting because they sometimes felt embarrassed if there were silly mistakes. Also, the participants in the interview claimed that electronic feedback system offered a less intimidating environment, which they found conducive for language learning. They felt that electronic feedback built a student-centered environment which made students responsible for their learning by making them aware of their strong and weak language skills (Saadi & Saadat, 2015).

From reading previous literature it has been noticed that researchers listed many benefits for e-feedback such as greater levels of participation, more motivation and interest, providing non-threatening environment, reducing anxiety and easy communication with teachers and peers (Farshi & Safa, 2015; Seifferdin & El-Sakka, 2017).
It can be noticed from previous studies that there are different focuses of feedback such as accuracy, some examine grammar correction, forms (e.g. nouns or syntax); other types may use coding, circling, or error description…etc. The present study tries to identify the nature, focus, amount and type of ELTs’ EFB given to their students’ own writings that have been submitted via the Oxford online ‘writing Tutor’. In addition, it seeks to identify the challenges that face both teachers and students in electronic feedback.

The present study tries to find answers to the following questions:

1- What is the nature of ELTs’ EFB i.e. positive vs. negative?
2- What is the focus of ELTs’ EFB?
3- What is the amount of ELTs’ EFB?

**Methodology**

**Context:**

Students of Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University (IAU) should sign for an intensive English language program in which they study for 18 hours a week distributed between two different categories of courses: an EAP/ESP course which is called Eng102 in which students study academic texts that follow content-based approach of syllabi and include major-based vocabulary. In this course students are required to write academic essays on different major-based themes and topics following different categories of essays such as, problem-solving, debate argumentative essays…etc. The other course is a General English course that is called Eng101 in which students study a course series entitled *Q: Skills for Success* published by Oxford University Press. It is a five-level course: beginners, low-intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced levels. The course follows a blended learning course type in which students have to finish up some quizzes, exams and tasks online using the university LMS and the publisher's online website. Students’ own level is determined by a placement test prepared by the Deanship of Preparatory Year (DYP) to relocate them in the appropriate track: humanities, science, engineering and medical.

To cope with technology and make use of its manifestations, The IAU has been using and manipulating one of the most famous technology-mediated communication (TMC) platforms and Learning Management Systems (LMS), it is Blackboard, so as to facilitate the process of communication between teachers or faculty members and students. Through Blackboard, teachers can teach online, assess and grade exams. They can email students, send
them tasks, announcements, examinations and grades of exams. In addition, students can communicate easily with their teachers. They can send teachers their answers to home assignments and exams. They can also email teachers if they have any inquiries or need help.

During the course students have to do a number of writing assignments and submit them via 'Blackboard' where students are able to read, proofread and publish their own writings. Then, teacher's role comes when students finally submit their own writings via blackboard. Teachers can not only edit students' writings but they can write their own feedback to students and send it to them either to their university emails or on blackboard as well.

Increasingly, the DPY has introduced the writing tutor to students to provide them with an additional learning platform to practice writing, grammatical structures and reading comprehension. This WT makes use of Oxford IQ Practice Online. It has been used not only for practice but also for feedback and assessment. So, it has been beneficial for teachers and students.

Students are required to submit weekly assignments from the WT per a pacing schedule prepared in advance by DEL. Moreover, teachers were provided with a detailed step-by-step guide to generate students' submission reports. In this guide DEL has also provided teachers with a rubric (see appendix) according to which students' works are graded systematically. This rubric was aimed to be very objective and comprehensive including writing structures, coherence, cohesion, writing mechanics, punctuation, grammar, spelling and creativity and novelty of ideas.

Research Design

The study follows a mixed-method of analyzing data and the analytical descriptive method of research and the Interpretive design of research in terms of analyzing teachers' written electronic feedback given to students qualitatively.

Participants

Four EFL medical track teachers were the subjects of this study. About 120 e-feedbacks of different students of these teachers were printed and examined. These feedbacks were sent to freshmen medical college students' emails and bb accounts.
**Instruments of the Study**

The study examined four ELTs' EFB on 120 students' essays (Males = 60, females = 60) submitted by medical track freshmen students at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University in first term of the academic year 2017/2018.

**Results and Discussion**

Giving e-feedback is important in terms of evaluation of the quality of students’ work and in gauging their achievement and performance (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The present study aimed to identify the nature, amount and focus of e-feedback that English language instructors at a Saudi University tended to give to their students. Therefore, this section will present the results and discussion of the analysis of the collected e-feedback given by ELTs. It will start with analyzing the nature of the e-feedback of these teachers followed by the focus and the amount of the e-feedback.

**The Nature of the ELTs' e-feedback**

It was noticed that the nature of e-feedback given by ELTs was different from one teacher to another. Some teachers tended to give positive EFB, some other teachers used negative while the majority tended to be neutral in their judgments. For example, teacher 1 wrote the following, 'well-done!', 'you have a good style of writing.', 'all in all it looks well-written and organized.', and 'keep up the good work.' In this e-feedback the teacher tried to motivate and encourage his students to write more. It seems that ELTs tried to be effective and motivating to their students. These positive and praising words may have, according to Hattie and Timperley (2007), a positive effect on learning and the conditions may result in changes in students' efforts and their engagement in learning.

On the other hand, it was noted that teacher 2 tried to avoid giving direct-negative e-feedback such as 'bad writing', 'this is not good.' It seems that he may not like to be discouraging to his students. It appears that he preferred to use 'indirect-negative' assessment to express their dissatisfaction with students' writings. For example, teacher 2 wrote, 'very well-written, however, I feel you can make key improvements by just reading it back to yourself and correct grammatical and typing mistakes.', and teacher 3 wrote, 'well-written but the structure can be more organized and may be split into paragraphs.'

It seems that teachers 2 tried to encourage the students to write better using 'praising' words which is directed to the learner's self. Teachers are advised to give direct e-feedback that directs students to and focuses on the task. Otherwise, it might take students' focus away from
the main task. Feedback should direct students to their errors to avoid making them in future. EFB should be directed to effort, self-regulation, involvement in the learning task such as teacher 3 who wrote, 'You used appropriate phrases, and the sentences are grammatically correct,' 'You are good at reconstructing arguments in a coherent presentation,' and 'You have a unique style of presentation of the topic.'

Moreover, it was found that the Teacher 4's EFB was general, misleading, and unclear. He wrote, 'Use present tense reporting verbs.', 'Few mistakes.', 'Be careful with spaces after punctuation.', and 'Run-on sentences.' Teacher 4 did not clarify the students' errors or direct the student correctly. Moreover, he tended to give the same comments or judgments to different students. It seems that the teacher tried to be neutral by giving the same comments.

Bates et al. (1993) claim that it is essential to use 'positive' or negative e-feedback to improve students' writing abilities. Ellis (2009) observes that it is important that students receive positive feedback, as it motivates them and supports them effectively. In addition, some studies on teacher e-feedback (e.g. Lee, 2009) have reported that teachers believe that admiring comments facilitate students' development more than criticism does. In addition, it positively affects students' feelings, boosts their self-confidence, and enhances their writing ability, as it helps them realize that their writing ability is something they can improve.

However, some researchers (e.g. Cohen, 1987) have concluded that too much praise may be misleading, confusing, and/or demotivating for students. Therefore, those researchers have suggested how to prepare students to deal with teachers' feedback. They advise teachers to use a balanced approach, between constructive criticism and admiration, to encourage quality in writing (Alkhatib, 2015, p. 53). Negative feedback is supposed to be corrective. Thus, it is aimed at pointing out and fixing the errors a student's writing. Negative feedback might sometimes tend to be harsh (e.g. poor writing), signaling the teacher’s total disapproval (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Furthermore, the nature of negative feedback must be effective, transparent, and specific, which means that it should contain guidelines regarding what and how could be improved. Evaluating the assessment merely as 'good' or 'bad' without providing any paralinguistic viewpoint and confirmation is not considered as motivating or correct feedback system. The response of a student for such feedbacks can easily be imagined as they could ask the teacher what should be done to make it better in the future. It is hard for the student to understand what is 'good' or what is 'bad' in their assessment. Therefore, it is advisable to have a reflection meeting with students after giving e-feedback.

Thus, it is clear that some teacher participants of the present study tended to use the term 'targeted praise' to indicate the good part or 'work-specific praise' as given by according
to Scrivener's (2012) to indicate the part which can be improved in the written assignment of students. This indicates that the participants use such feedbacks more commonly that are formative in nature and have more details. On the other hand, teachers should take care to make their feedback more effective by considering its productivity, clearness, and usefulness as the feedback system is used for the guidance of the development and progress of a student and also helps in making the teaching process better. Instead of commenting vague terms like “well-done” or “you can change that,” a more specific feedback like “use a synonym” or “change the word order” could be more beneficial.

Additionally, useful information in the form of reflective questions can be designed on electronic feedbacks. The examples include, “Is it possible to split this sentence into one or two shorter ones?”, “Can you use a synonym to represent your notion more precisely?”, “Can you use adverbs to illustrate the working of people?”, “Can you arrange the paragraphs again for the better flow of text?” etc. Moreover, these questions should also align with the student’s ability level. Such reflective questions involve a sense of accountability on the students for their own learning as it targeted the enhancement of learning ownership, motivation, as well as responsibility. To conclude, it should be noted that both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ feedback are effective and help the students. However, there are some students who might be discouraged when given negative feedback and there are students who may not progress when having positive e-feedback.

The Focus of ELTs' e-feedback

Concerning the focus of ELTs’ e-feedback, it was noted that most ELTs focused on grammar, punctuation, content, spelling errors and mechanics. Students received feedback on the aspects of grammar and mechanics such as sentence structure, word order, missing subjects, missing words, spelling, use of plural and singular, use of definite and indefinite articles, use of countable and uncountable nouns, and use of prepositions.

Teacher 1 focused on grammatical errors (e.g. verb form, use of verb tense, run-on sentences, and fragments). He did not comment on misspellings and cohesion of ideas. Conversely, teacher 2 focused on punctuation and word choice (e.g. capitalization, indentation, commas use). He did not comment on grammar or coherence of ideas. Few teachers were found to focus on coherence and cohesion of the students’ essays. In addition, no teachers have commented on the originality and novelty of students’ ideas because some of the students may have taken some of their writings from online references or their classmates. Moreover, it was noted that few teachers focused on the process or the task of writing itself. This might be due to the nature of the teaching context in which there is discrepancy and interference between the
mother language (Arabic) and English as a target language (TL) where teaching is usually targeted more towards grammar and vocabulary.

Furthermore, there is a need to discriminate between serious, minor frequent and infrequent errors in this context. AlKhatib (2015, p. 42) claims that the errors that can cause interruption in the communication (such as sending unclear or vague comments) are considered as serious, while the errors (such as morphological ones) that do not hinder the clarity of the written matter are termed as minor errors. Some studies also suggest another type of error, called as stigmatizing error. In this type of error, the students may get labelled as not-so-proficient authors (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012, p. 146). It has been claimed that most of the teachers give attention to the stigmatizing as well as high-frequency errors (Lee, 2013).

In the present study it was noted whether teachers focused mainly on local errors related to language form more or less than the global errors that are related to organization and content. Also, some teachers focused on serious errors while some few teachers focused upon minor and stigmatizing errors.

It gives an indication that their method was non-selective for EFB but somewhat comprehensive in nature. Nevertheless, this does not essentially mean that tutors go along with the comprehensive method as the feedback investigation does not demonstrate whether or not the tutors have corrected all the mistakes they found in an assignment. It can be said that investigating the feedback system cannot provide full information regarding the uncorrected mistakes as decision of the teacher is not known whether they have deliberately not corrected the mistakes or not detected the errors in the written text.

These findings are in line with Lee (2004, 2008, 2009) and Montgomery and Baker (2007). Additionally, according to Ferris (2003), ELTs' feedback was directive and a broader range of ELTs might have followed a form-focused feedback so that their students' needs and expectations could be fulfilled.

**The Amount of ELTs' feedback**

According to Alkhatib (2015), it is important for a writing teacher to decide whether to focus on a *few* specific error categories (i.e. selective Written Corrective Feedback) (e.g. Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Lee, 2013; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010) or to indicate all errors (i.e. comprehensive WCF) in without focusing on a specific area (Evans et al., 2010; Ferris, 2002; Hartshorn et al., 2010). The first point of view see that it is easier for teachers especially when s/he teaches many students. Teachers will find it less strenuous to process, analyze and apply (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012). On the other hand, the advocates of comprehensive FB claim
that accuracy is valued and perfection is expected, so teachers should correct everything. This controversy led some researchers call for a middle ground in which specific but several error categories are corrected instead of a few or all errors (AlKhatib, 2015, p. 51).

The analysis of data of the present study reveals that ELTs followed different practices with respect to the amount of e-feedback. Teacher (1) tended to write so many comments on ALL errors committed in students' writings. He did not miss a mistake even the 'indentation' of the paragraphs. This might be very discouraging and demotivating to students. However, it might lead to perfection and accuracy as mentioned above.

On the other hand, teachers 2 and 3 tended to give short brief comments on few errors. This is called 'selective feedback'. This might be due to the large number of students that the teachers had to assess and also their own teaching load or work tasks. So, it is difficult for teachers to check the writings of 100 students twice. This may suggest that teachers can have group feedback in which teachers give general guidelines for writing that students follow.

Giving so much e-feedback, according to Lee (2009), might be because of the fact that teachers might not have received proper training, because they tend to exhibit how hard they have worked, or because they try to satisfy the needs and expectations of students and parents. Teachers may also be concerned that if they leave some errors unmarked, students will not realize all their mistakes.

Bitchener and Ferris (2012) and Lee (2013) mention that the amount of teacher's e-feedback usually depends on the students' proficiency and the purpose of marking. So, it is aimed at guiding learners to identify the error patterns and learn how to do away with the most prevalent errors that they make. Selective correction strategies may be provided. Likewise, Selective EFB is more fruitful with beginner students who are learning how to develop a text; therefore, with beginners, teachers’ feedback may be focused more on language than the content because too much feedback will be irritating for them as they will be surely suffering from a large number of errors on their writing. On the other hand, with advance level students, teachers may choose to give comprehensive feedback that enables them to notice all of their errors, thereby helping them produce an error-free text (AlKhatib, 2015). Hence, it can be concluded that ELTs tended to give brief e-feedback or short comments.

**Summary of Results**

This study aimed to investigate mainly the nature, amount and focus of e-feedback given by English language teachers at a Saudi University. A descriptive-analytical approach was used to analyze teachers' e-feedback. The present study yielded some useful and
motivating results. First, most ELTs tend to use selective feedback in which they focused mainly on grammar and punctuation errors. Second, few teachers focused on coherence and cohesion of the ideas of topics of writings. Increasingly, they gave direct clear e-feedback to students. Moreover, some teachers used to give general remarks or comments. On contrary, some other teachers gave detailed remarks or directives to students. Also, some teachers tended to give positive feedback rather than negative one while other teachers were neutral in their judgments. Finally, it was found that only one teacher gave explicit-direct feedback (marking and correcting errors where the wrong word was struck through and the right word was suggested).

Conclusion and Implications

Based on the results of this study and analysis of its data, the following recommendations and/or suggestions can be drawn and directed to EFL teachers. For example, English Language Department (ELD) should hold professional development sessions for teachers to train them on 'how to give a precise helpful feedback'. In addition, teachers should be directed to give motivating encouraging EFB and should not give too much EFB but keep it precise and focused. Teachers need to focus on minor errors; however, they should focus on stigmatizing and fossilized errors. Moreover, teachers should know that students are different. So, their writings are also different. Hence, teacher should never copy and paste an EFB given to a student to another. Additionally, teachers should also try to have face-to-face meetings with students in the LRSC in order to deal with stigmatizing or fossilized errors and should not give general unclear comments on students' writings. They should use explicit direct EFB rather than implicit indirect EFB. ELD should hold writing workshops to their students before they work by themselves on their assignments. Finally, teachers should encourage their students to have peer-to-peer feedback and learn self-editing strategies such as, breaking up the whole task into smaller chunks, reading the text aloud, finding out when a word is misplaced or does not sound right, and when sentences are unreasonably long, repetitive or choppy, or focusing on specific error patterns and editing them, and using electronic tools effectively (Word processor and other online editing tools such as 'grammar checkers and turn-it-in'), and finally finding a peer to read and give critical comments on the text.

It is also recommended that the DEL should hold a meeting for teachers to agree upon certain policies or a scheme, not only a rubric, for giving e-feedback and should confirm that
teachers should know about their students’ stigmatizing and fossilized errors, then they can hold a workshop on treating these errors.

References


