STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR REFLECTIVE ESSAY WRITING EXPERIENCE AND TEACHER FEEDBACK COMMENTS

Asiah Mohd Sharif
Siti Zaidah Zainuddin
University of Malaya
amsharif@um.edu.my, zaidah75@um.edu.my

Abstract

Reflection which encompasses critical and analytical capabilities is a critical 21st century skill for students to develop. To ensure students are equipped with this skill, reflective writing has been identified as a possible tool. Teacher feedback on students' written output therefore plays a role in developing students' reflective skills. This study asks two questions: How do students perceive their experience writing reflective essays? What is the nature of the teacher's feedback comments on students' reflective essays and how do students perceive them? To answer these questions, nineteen ESL students in an entry-level Medical programme completed a questionnaire concerning their experiences writing reflective essays and perceptions of teacher feedback on these essays. Interviews were conducted with two students to follow-up on questionnaire responses. The content analysis showed that the students believed reflective writing played a small contribution to their language learning. Further investigation into the students' perspectives of their teachers' feedback comments suggests that even though the teachers' feedback was positive, the students also referred to the comments as inadequate and ineffective. Pedagogical implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: teacher feedback; reflective essay writing; student perception

Reflection involves engagement in critical and analytical thinking which can help an individual to adapt to new situations. Moreover, a reflective individual is likely inclined towards life-long learning and becoming a reflective practitioner. It is hardly surprising therefore that reflection is touted to be a necessary skill in the 21st century where change is constant. In this paper, reflection is viewed as "a mental process that incorporates critical thought about an experience and demonstrates learning that can be taken" (Quinton & Smallbone, 2010, p. 126). This is usually triggered by an event or situation leading to increased understanding or awareness which can be future reference when faced with a similar event or situation. Developing the reflective capacity, thus, is given serious attention in various fields including education. Increasingly, educational activities are being planned and implemented to develop reflective learners. For example, writing reflective essays has been introduced in an English language programme for entry level Medical students at a public university in Malaysia as an effort to prepare students to become future practitioners with competence that transcends content.

Developing reflective skills among Malaysian students at the tertiary level, however, may not be straightforward. It is known that students who come to university are mostly products of teaching and learning in which transmission of knowledge is still dominant. "Moreover, most students entering medical school are aged 18-22 years and their ability to reflect, not to mention their ability to capture reflections in writing, may not properly develop until the later stages of either their personal maturity or their professional careers" (Hays & Gay, 2011, p. 117). These factors would likely make any attempt to develop reflective skills problematic and challenging. Overcoming them would require an expert teacher who is able to scaffold student learning through the use of various strategies which include effective feedback. The present study examines the experience of a group of students writing reflective essays (REs) and their perceptions of teacher feedback (TF) comments on their essays.

Reflective writing
Reflective writing (RW) is a form of teaching skill which has been given serious attention by educators in both ESL classrooms as well as in the EFL contexts. Drawing from research, Quinton and Smallbone (2010) believe that written reflection is more powerful than oral discussion and it provides a permanent record for later referencing. The social media networks provide many examples of this where individuals record their thoughts, actions and in return receive feedback from others (Kanthan & Senger, 2011). Within the educational context, reflective writing is fostered through various tasks such as writing reflective portfolios,

journals, stories and essays. Despite the attempts made to develop this writing skill, scholars reported that the prevailing quality of RW appears to be lacking depth (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010; Hume, 2009; Roux, Mora, & Tamez, 2012). This is partly because RW is a complex ability which takes a long time to develop even by experienced teachers (Roux et al., 2012). Writing a successful reflective essay, for example, requires the writer to use a specific occasion and explore it from different angles in order to probe its meaning (California Assessment Program, n.d.) The occasion can be a personal experience or a general concept and reflection can occur at any point which is meaningful to the writer. As such, RW has no defined structure and this contributes to the difficulty of mastering it.

Fortunately, besides highlighting difficulty associated with RW which contributes to its difficulty, the growing literature on this topic has also increased understanding on how higher levels of reflective writing can be fostered. For example, Dekker et al. (2013) based on their study suggested that written feedback comments should be formulated as a question, positive in tone and tailored to the individual student's reflective level to stimulate student reflection. In another study, Quinton and Smallbone (2010) outlined the use of a feedback sheet to engage students with TF. Completed feedback sheets were collated by each student to form a portfolio of reflective sheets. Each sheet contains points for action to guide the planning of personal development. Additionally, informal conferences, classroom discussions (Gorlewski & Greene, 2011) and purposeful coaching of reflective skills (Hume, 2009) have been identified as worthy activities for consideration.

Feedback methods

The general literature on feedback notes that teachers employ different ways to comment on students' work. These include written feedback (Hartshorn et al., 2010; Junqueira & Payant, 2015; Lee, 2004; Zamel, 1985), oral feedback (Dunsford, 2006; Wasding, 2013), audio feedback (Kim, 2004; Wood, Mosovitz, & Valiga, 2011), peer feedback (Nilson, 2003; O'Donnell, 2014; Paulus, 1999), teacher-student conferences (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Saito, 1994) and computer-based feedback (Monroe, 2003; Paulus, 1999; Wade-Stein & Kintsch, 2004; Yoke et al., 2013) among others.

Despite the variety, written feedback is said to be the most popular among teachers (Ferris, 1997; Saito, 1994) and valued and preferred by students (Higgins, 2000; Treglia, 2009) for it allows multiple revisits because of its permanence. However, Mahili (1994) perceives it as an impersonal, one-way communication which may confuse students. Moreover, it is not as efficient and effective as e-mail and oral feedback (Monroe, 2003). E-mail and oral feedback according to Monroe (2003), can offer two-way communication either directed at an individual or a whole class. For whole class teaching, they allow not only comments on problems but also examples extracted from students' papers (Dunsford, 2006) increasing opportunities for students to learn about numerous problems and their solutions. Students may pay more attention as they are less threatened since the sources of problems discussed can remain confidential. Nevertheless, it is necessary to highlight that not all students prefer computer-based feedback as computer anxiety (Matsumura & Hann, 2004) and accessibility can be an issue.

Elsewhere, peer feedback as a way to learn to write has been highlighted by scholars (Smith II, Broughton, & Copley, 2005). Its benefits and problems have been discussed extensively (Nilson, 2003; O'Donnell, 2014; Paulus, 1999). Peer feedback is reported to promote a sense of community, improve students' social skills, promote unity, foster a sense of ownership and create a more positive attitude toward writing in the writer. However, the possibility of feedback that lacks quality due to issues with language proficiency or lack of responding skills exists (O'Donnell, 2014). An example is provided by Xie, Ke, and Sharma (2008) who discovered that the pairing of students with peers who showed lower level of reflective thinking in their journals was very likely to result in the other not engaging in higher level of reflective thinking either.

Drawing from the literature, Kim (2004) noted that early studies suggest that students prefer voice over written feedback. It is also believed to enhance feedback to in-process drafts but this is dependent on the teacher's skill. Finally, a small study on teacher-student conferences by Patthey-Chavez and Ferris (1997) revealed that students' achievement levels had a great influence on the way teachers talk during conferencing. They discovered that teachers gave less instruction to low achievers than to high achievers. Teachers also reportedly used indirect approaches and hedges to mask or soften the display of power differences which is not considered as an optimal communication strategy.

Tone of feedback

One area of concern in research on TF is the tone of feedback. Feedback is said to be more effective when it is positive in tone (Dekker, Schönrock-Adema, Snoek, van der Molen, & Cohen-Schotanus, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). However, teachers seem to focus their feedback on the shortcomings of writing by attending to error more than excellence (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Zamel, 1985). This is unfortunate as learners remember and value encouraging remarks (Ferris, 1995) as they provide effective support to learners and motivate sustained learning (Cardelle & Corno, 1981; Ellis,

2009). That said, it is necessary to state that positive feedback is not always effective on improving student revision (Dunsford, 2006; Ferris, 1997).

Focus of feedback

Focus of feedback is another aspect of TF which has received considerable attention e.g. should feedback focus on global (i.e. errors affecting overall sentence organization) or local errors (i.e. errors affecting single elements in a sentence)? Should TF target a few error types (focused) or all errors (unfocused)? Sommers (1982) and Burt (1975) believed priority should be given to global errors. Mahili (1994) suggested the same particularly when responding to early drafts in process writing since rewriting is expected. Focusing on local errors at this stage, she correctly pointed out, is a waste of time. However, L2 students appear to prefer feedback on local errors (Saito, 1994) and value teachers' feedback on them. Ellis (2009) suggested focusing on marked features that learners appear to struggle with. Ferris (1999) argued that feedback on local errors should be directed at rule-governed, "treatable" grammatical errors. Where focused or unfocused feedback is concerned, the general opinion favours focused feedback (Ellis, 2009).

In summary, it is obvious that reflective writing and responding to students' writings are complex issues. Students' reflective essays must be provided with effective feedback which is focused, clear, applicable, and encouraging (Lindeman, 2001) so that it would be meaningful for students. Most importantly, this type of learning will assist students in self-regulating their own learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Despite this, little attention has been given to reflective writing and the types of feedback teachers give their students particularly those in the medical field and the extent to which ESL students find these helpful. Therefore, this study investigates ESL medical students' perceptions of their experience writing reflective essays and teacher feedback received. The findings of this study may inform teaching and learning practice in the ESL classroom.

METHOD
Research design
This is a case study which adopts the qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Students' perspectives on their experience writing REs were explored. The students' perspectives on the effectiveness of teacher feedback were also probed.

Context of the study
The study was conducted at a public university in Malaysia during an 84-hour (seven hours per week) general English course over a period of 12 weeks. The course which is a part of the Language in Medicine programme is a content-based language learning course covering all the four language skills. For assessing writing in this course, students were required to write REs which were based on selected site visits. The essays were also a mechanism to develop students who are observant, critical, analytical and able to reflect on their learning experiences so as to take away lessons from them which might be relevant to their future practice. Altogether, students wrote seven essays of which the best five were chosen to contribute towards 25% of their grade.

As preparation for RW, a one-off briefing on how to write REs was conducted before the first site visit. Additionally, students attended a one-hour lecture with clinicians to learn about a topic which was related to the site visit for the week. Following each site visit, students wrote a RE of about 500 words to be submitted electronically for grading the following week. Periodic formal feedback sessions were scheduled but feedback for each assigned essay was expected. How feedback is delivered was left to the discretion of individual teachers as there was no standard policy in place. The feedback provided is aimed at providing constant evaluation and support to students throughout the reflective writing and learning process.

Participants of the Study
The research participants comprised 19-year-old entry-level medical students (N=19) who wrote reflective essays during the 2015/2016 academic session. They were mainly Malay, Chinese and Indian ESL students who scored between Band 3 and 5 on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The MUET Bands 3-5 encompass students with modest to good command of English. Even though the students were formerly educated in either the national schools (Malay as medium of instruction) or the national type schools (Chinese and Tamil as medium of instruction), English remains the second language. Two students were interviewed. Consent was sought from all the participants prior to administering the questionnaire and the interviews.

Instrumentation and procedure
Data were collected using student questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire, comprising of closed and open-ended questions (see Appendix A), was developed following a comprehensive literature review on reflection and feedback. It was aimed at eliciting demographic information and information about students' experience writing REs and the TF comments they received.

The questionnaire was administered by the course instructor during class time to ensure that all queries students had were answered. No time limit was set for this task. At this point, students had already written four REs and so were aware of the

feedback strategy used by their instructor. Data from the completed questionnaires were analysed using Nvivo. Open-ended items were subject to content analysis to identify relevant categories and themes.

Content analysis was also conducted on the semi-structured interviews for the same purpose. Two students volunteered to be interviewed by the researcher at the end of the course. The interviews which aimed at following up on responses to the questionnaire were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The main questions directing the discussion were: (1) How would you describe your reflective writing learning experience?, (2) What are the issues and challenges you faced in writing reflective essays?, and (3) What types of feedback were given and how useful was the teacher feedback in assisting you to develop your reflective skills? Analyses on student questionnaire and interview data are presented and discussed below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS
Question 1: How do students perceive their experience writing reflective essays?
Findings from the questionnaire suggest that only a handful of students (5/19) perceived their experience writing reflective essays as meaningful. One student claimed that the experience was "*something new and interesting*" and four felt the REs helped them to learn more from their site visit experiences. Sarah described an example of her learning in this way,

> '*It's really different when I go there as a patient and someone who is like looking at what the doctor is doing. So, I learned that people watch you. The simple thing like she was jotting down notes but at the same time she was also looking at the computer and made me wonder: Is that OK? Or is that not? But then it got me thinking I probably got to do that and then I wonder what kind of things…silly, silly things that I might be doing in the future if I were to be a GP…I love how the doctor was really precise, straight forward but then still friendly with her questions*'.

Most students (7/19) did not reveal much enthusiasm in describing their RE writing experiences. While one student attributed the lack of enthusiasm for writing REs to poor English proficiency, another confessed that the essays were written half-heartedly,

> '*Sometimes I thought I am doing it just for the sake of the class. Not really truly from the heart*'.

Some students perceived writing reflective essays as unexciting (1/19) or mere retelling of knowledge (1/19) perhaps due to lack of creativity in varying contents in their essays. One student noted in the questionnaire,

> '*Sometimes it is quite boring because you tend to look at the same way of explanation of the doctors. The essay written is just a retelling of what I feel from the site visits and there is not much to write about when it comes to questioning procedures because it is already fixed as protocols*'.

Students also revealed that being '*too focused with the visit instead of the occasion happens around*' impacted on the way they wrote their essays (2/19). Thus, it was natural to believe that the reflective essays "*could have been better*" (1/19). During the interview Sarah explained why the reflections could have been better.

> '*I think I used like maybe it was half half (referring to reflection and description) but I think it should have been 75, 25. Seventy-five of expressing what I feel, rather than the scientific part and the descriptive part of it. Plus, it was only one page thing with double spacing so I think I didn't get much opportunity to express what I feel because later it would be too long. It would be annoying to read*'.

The tendency for students to provide superficial contents with the presence of little to no critical reflection is well noted in the literature (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010; Gorlewski & Greene, 2011; Hume, 2009). Informal conferences, classroom discussions (Gorlewski & Greene, 2011) and purposeful coaching of reflective skills (Hume, 2009) are recommended as these appear to assist students in improving the quality of their written reflections.

Some students regarded writing ~~Res~~ REs as difficult (3/19) either because '*it's still new*' or because of their inclination to focus on description,

> '*It was very difficult because we tend to describe what we observed during the site visit rather than expressing our view and the benefits we gain*'.

This is of little surprise as most of the students (11/19) did not have prior experience writing REs. Those who claimed to have prior experience writing an RE only did so on one occasion when they were in secondary school. During the interview Chia implied that there was a need for the teacher to remind students about the characteristics of an RE and perhaps, provide more guidance especially in the early stages.

> '*Actually at first if not mistaken we are told to write a reflective essay without knowing. May be our teacher expect us to go and find out what is reflective essay. May be she thinks at this point we already know what is a reflective essay. After a few reflective essay my teacher say I write something it's more to technical. It's like what I learn there. Like what I see. It's not something what I feel about the site visit. She talked to me in the class then individually*'.

Dyment and O'Connell (2010), based on a review of literature, argued that students are entitled to understand all aspects of the journal writing process before commencing writing as they might not be clear about the level of reflection expected of them. The student's testimony justifies the merit of this argument.

Difficulty in writing reflections was also experienced by those who enjoyed writing them (3/19). One student found writing REs was *'quite difficult'* but *'interesting'*. Others recognized that the difficulty was because writing REs was taxing and very demanding. Sarah explained the difficulty students experienced in writing reflections in this way,

> '*Some of the students they get into medical studies...Medical Faculty because they have good grades. How did they get good grades? By mugging. They're not the touchy feely kind so getting them to reflect was a task in itself. So when they were not getting the A's, they would go and sit with those students who were getting the A's and they would tell you it is so difficult for me to write like this because I can only write objectively*'.

Roux et al. (2012) who studied the reflective writing of Mexican EFL writers concluded that difficulty can arise from lack of familiarity with reflective writing, low level of proficiency in English language and inclination toward an inductive style of learning. This study appears to support their findings.

Despite the challenges facing the students, most seemed to have an idea of the contents that deserve a place in an RE. All students were aware of the relevance of including their thoughts about lessons learnt from their site visits in addition to various descriptive details in their reflections (19). Sixteen students claimed they included comments about their feelings about different aspects of the site visits they described. Fifteen students incorporated their evaluation of their experiences into their reflections. Only a handful admitted omitting comments (3/19) or evaluation (4/19). However, it was noted that even when students claimed including comments in their essays they

also stated that it was not a constant.

Language proficiency appears to be a major stumbling block for students in including comments in their essays. Eight students struggled to express ideas in English due to limited proficiency. Two students revealed poor attitude as a factor preventing them from commenting and another cited inability to engage with personal emotions. Interestingly, six students stated that commenting never occurred to them. The students were provided with an orientation on how to write a reflective essay before writing their first reflection. According to Sarah, slides were shown to students,

> '*to look at for the reflective writing and to say this is what we will have to do and so take notes...it was just like input lecture kind of style thing that would have been about an hour's slot*'.

It would be reasonable to assume that the inclusion of comments would have been covered during this lecture. The fact that it did not register with the students to include comments suggests that there was a need to revisit and refine teaching during the writing process to promote greater depth of reflection (Fish & Cossart, 2007). A literature review undertaken to identify ways of facilitating students' reflective practice in a medical course revealed that one of the conditions needed to encourage reflection is the provision of structure and guidelines (Chaffey et al., 2012).

Question 2: What is the nature of the teacher's feedback comments on students' reflective essays and how do students perceive them?

Initially, this study was intended to examine teacher's written feedback on students' reflective essays. One of the questions it sought to answer was the focus of the teacher's written feedback in responding to students' written reflections. Students were required to rate the extent teacher written feedback was focused on organization, reflection, grammar, vocabulary, language structure, and spelling and punctuation. However, this research issue had to be reconsidered when the findings as summarised in Table 1 were deemed inconsistent.

Table 1: Student's perceptions of teacher's written feedback focus.

Categories/Frequency	A lot	Some	A little	None	N
Grammar	1	9	7	2	19
Language structure	3	5	7	4	19
Organization	2	5	12	0	19
Reflection	0	5	11	3	19
Spelling and punctuation	3	12	2	2	19
Vocabulary	4	4	10	1	19

*n= total number of responses

For example, most students perceived there was very little (11/19) or no feedback comments (3/19) on reflection. The same was observed for other important aspects of reflective writing such as

language structure, organization and vocabulary. It turned out that when the questionnaire was administered, students had received only oral feedback despite having written four reflective

essays. The two students who were interviewed later revealed that the class never saw any of their marked essays. Chia said,

> *'We don't get to see our essay that's the problem...We passed up the hard copy but we don't get it back'.*

Apparently, the rating reflected in Table 1 is a combination of responses based on students' perceptions of their teacher's oral and/or actual written feedback comments. This undermined the study's attempt to decipher the teacher's focus in written feedback practice. Thus, focus was shifted to teacher's oral feedback.

The interviewees highlighted that the oral feedback given was usually brief and general. Sarah commented,

> *'Like you should have been more reflective but then I guess we didn't get our paper back so I'm not sure what I did was right or how I can change it'.*

The feedback provided, additionally, did not correspond with the frequency of the written reflective essays and was conveyed mainly through the whole classroom approach. Chia explained,

> *'And the only feedback that we get is may be a few times...when she just speak in front of the whole class'.*

The issue of timeliness of the feedback comments was also mentioned.

> *'May be the feedback should come a bit early because if for example we write our essay we submit it then she gave us the feedback on the same week then for the next essay we can improve'.*

It seems the first feedback comments were received after students had written three reflective essays which suggests that students had to wait far too long before they were informed about how they were doing. Late feedback means students, particularly those who were struggling and engaging in superficial reflections, continued to produce low quality work as the delay deprived students of noticing gaps in their performance (Schmidt, 1990; Spiller, 2009). Delaying allowed ample opportunities to repeat mistakes (Chappuis, 2012) and may prove to be frustrating and detrimental to the knowledge and skill acquisition of these students (Shute, 2008).

Students also expressed their feelings regarding receiving only verbal feedback on their essays. Four students said they had no objection but would have preferred receiving written feedback. Additionally, one of them wished the essays were returned *"so that we can learn from it"* - all essays were retained by the teacher for documentation of marks for the final grade. Eight categorically stated

they disagreed with the provision of only oral feedback. These students provided various reasons to justify their preference for the written feedback. This is best captured in the following comments found in a questionnaire,

> *'I'm quite unsatisfied because I'm not able to identify my mistakes. Thus, I may repeat it throughout the whole series of reflective essay. Written feedbacks are more specific to individual. Verbal feedbacks are general and we may not take note of it'.*

Clearly, students could see many benefits in getting teacher written feedback. For example, written feedback individualizes learning as it draws attention specifically to weaknesses in students' own writing; not those of others. By drawing the student's attention to material not adequately learned (Cardelle & Corno, 1981), it has potential for improving future performance by feeding forward into subsequent writing (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Similar opinion was expressed in a study by Jackson and Marks (2014) whose participant explained that, *"reading the feedback and looking over past hand-ins can help see some things to improve you are not aware of"* (p. 1). This belief is perceptive as "reflection generally follows meaningful encounters or teachable moments" (Branch Jr. & Paranjape, 2002, p. 1187). When feedback comment is relevant to the student there is hope that it will be noticed and acted on in subsequent writing tasks. While the majority favoured written feedback, some students said receiving only verbal feedback was sufficient. They rationalized it was better than not getting any feedback at all (4/19) or perceived no real difference between written and oral feedback (1/19). However, one student's frankness is especially disturbing,

> *'I feel it is alright to not be able to see the written comments because I most probably will not read the comments because I feel the reflective essay is less important'.*

This comment implies that there is a possibility that the overall goal of writing the REs and how it relates to students' learning and future profession was not adequately discussed. Chia confirmed this.

> *'The teacher should have tell them why reflective writing is useful to them. How it is useful for them in the future'.*

Apparently, not being reminded sufficiently of the goals of writing is not unique to the students in this study (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010; Sandars, 2009). Sandars (2009) observed that it is common for the learner to be instructed 'to reflect' but with little or no explanation of the purpose. He believes that such explanation is essential initially to provide

information about its importance for professional practice and lifelong learning.

Interestingly, the students' less than complimentary perceptions of their teacher's delivery of feedback have little influence on their rating of the teacher's feedback. Eight students stated they were satisfied with the feedback received while six cited they were somewhat satisfied. Only five stated they were not satisfied with the feedback received. The two students who were interviewed stated the feedback "*could have been better*" or rated it as "*inadequate.*" Chia explained,

> '*Most of the feedback...the lecturer didn't give...Feedback about the grammar everything. Actually, I need that also. I think my grammar is not that good because I am not from English background. I'm from Chinese school. So, I think if she can just give me more comments I can just correct about it. It's better'.*

In other words, feedback is more meaningful when it considers varying students' level of knowledge and ability. This finding underscores the need for teachers to remember that one size fits all TF strategy is unlikely to be effective as students come with varying language learning history, and levels of knowledge and skills.

During the interview, the students identified various feedback inputs they required but did not receive. They include concrete, text-specific examples of what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable in a reflection, comments about problems with word choice and improving links between sentences. They also cited their needs for acknowledgement of correct performance as "*students like to hear it*". Sarah explained,

> '*Some people find it taxing so may be if they know what they were doing right then maybe they'll keep on doing it'.*

Chia added,

> '*Maybe the teacher say something: You did this right but there is still room for improvement then after that the student will have more interest in this reflective essay'.*

The feedback comments given, according to the students, rarely acknowledged good work. This is unfortunate as positive comments are more effective than those which provide information on incorrect responses (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). At the least, it has potential to be a powerful motivator (Cardelle & Corno, 1981) although it may not always result in better quality in subsequent writings.

CONCLUSION

The present study was an attempt to explore the students' perceptions regarding the problems, challenges and contributions of reflective writing. In this respect, we found mixed results but most students consider reflective writing as a challenging learning task. The findings of this study resonate studies by McMullan (2006) and Coleman and Willis 2015). Several noted reasons for this less than enthusiastic perception towards reflective writing were lack of proficiency, the emphasis on course content and the fact that this kind of writing is new to them. Despite these challenges, the students think that reflective writing has great potential. Chappuis (2012, p. 37) views effective feedback as one which 'directs attention to the intended learning, pointing out strengths and offering specific information to guide improvement'.

This study also explored students' perceptions on the effectiveness of teacher feedback. Generally, the feedback is positive and encouraging. However, the testimonies by the students imply the feedback comments were short in several aspects. Results revealed that there was a gap between the teacher's feedback practices and the students' expectations concerning frequency of feedback and its contents. The teacher, generally, is perceived as providing infrequent feedback and inadequate comments, while the students showed a strong need for them. Timeliness in feedback delivery needs to be observed as feedback is most useful while it still matters to students, for encouragement and to orient students' efforts throughout the rest of the course (Gibb and Simpson, 2004, p 29). There is a need to consider the students' levels of ability, attitudes, motivation, and personality. Students value and prefer written feedback.

One of the limitations of the study was that the number of participant was very small. Thus, this study is not generalizable since it is unique to this context only. More participants would have afforded this study invaluable insights in providing a more comprehensive opportunity to understand the reality of the research context. Secondly, this study involved only student perceptions. A further study might therefore include perceptions from teachers as this would shed light on their implicit beliefs regarding reflective writing and feedback practices. More importantly, teacher involvement would enable confirmation of claims made by students. Since reflective writing involves 'dialogic' interaction with oneself, future studies might also consider think-aloud protocol or reflective journals as instruments for documenting metacognitive processes.

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