

**THE REALITY OF TEACHER WRITTEN FEEDBACK:  
A quantitative study**

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## Abstrakti

Kirjoittaminen on olennainen osa vieraan kielen taitoa ja kirjoitustaitoja arvostetaan kaikilla koulutuksen asteilla sekä työelämässä. Tämän vuoksi on tärkeää tarkastella minkälaista palautetta vieraan kielen oppijat saavat, sillä opettajan palautteella on eittämättä suuri merkitys oppijan taitojen kehittämisessä. Aikaisemmat tutkimukset ovat useimmiten keskittyneet ideaaliin opettajan antamaan kirjalliseen palautteeseen sen sijaan, että olisi selvitetty millaista palautetta opettajat todellisuudessa antavat. Tällä tutkimuksella pyrittiin nimenomaan pääsemään perille tämän palautteenantamisen muodon nykytilasta, jotta sitä voitaisiin kehittää realistiselta pohjalta. Hyland (2003: 3-18) tarjosi tutkimukselle teoreettisen pohjan esittelemällä kuusi olennaista kirjoittamisen osa-alueita, joiden mukaan tutkimuksen aineiston opettajan kirjallinen palaute jaoteltiin. Nämä kuusi osa-alueita olivat; kielirakenteet, tekstifunktiot, luova ilmaisu, kirjoitusprosessi, sisältö sekä genre. Aineisto koostui 30 suomalaisen lukiolaisen englannin kielen kirjoitelmista, joissa oli mukana heidän opettajansa antama kirjallinen palaute. Hylandin teorian mukaisesti jaoteltu aineisto käsiteltiin kvantitatiivisesti, jotta saatiin selville edellä mainittujen osa-alueiden prosenttiosuudet ja niiden välinen hierarkia. Tulosten mukaan opettajan antama kirjallinen palaute on Hylandin teorian valossa hyvin epätasapainoista, sillä eniten kommentoitu osa-alue, eli kielirakenteet, kattoi yli 80 prosenttia kaikesta annetusta palautteesta. Tulokset nostavat esiin monia kysymyksiä. Ensinnäkin on mielenkiintoista pohtia, mistä tämä epätasapaino johtuu. Toisekseen on olennaista kyseenalaistaa tällaisen rakennekeskeisen kielinäkemyksen mielekkyys ja hyödyllisyys ja täten on myös tärkeää tarkastella mahdollisia muita painotuksia vieraankielen kirjoittamisen opetuksessa.

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## **1 Introduction**

As students are expected to invest their time and energy in writing essays, it is only reasonable to expect something from the teachers in return. It is the student's right to get a response to essays and receive a concrete sign that the effort has been paid attention to. Of course, the teacher's limited resources cannot be ignored, but it is the teacher's duty to provide the most helpful and extensive response as possible. The question here is then what are the means for achieving this reciprocity between the student and the teacher. Even though other feedback forms, such as peer feedback, writing workshops, computer-mediated feedback and oral conferences are becoming more commonly used and in spite of the disadvantages of teacher written feedback, the traditional teacher written feedback still continues to play the most central role according to researchers and based on actual real-life experiences. Previous studies have often focused on the ideal of teacher written feedback but in order to improve this feedback form one must first get acquainted with the starting point. Therefore, it is worth examining what this particular feedback form consists of, on one hand in theory and, on the other hand, in practice. The present study additionally aims at discovering and questioning the underlying motivations of real-life teacher written feedback. In the present study, 30 essays written by Finnish upper secondary school students were gathered and the teacher written feedback in these essays was quantitatively compared to a theory of curriculum orientations by Hyland (2003: 3-18).

## **2 Writing and feedback**

### **2.1 The debatable but favoured teacher written feedback**

Writing has always been a significant part of foreign language teaching, since it is an excellent way of processing and practising many aspects of language. However, in

the recent years the significance of writing has become even greater in foreign language teaching, as according to Weigle (2002:1) writing is no longer merely a means to learn grammar and vocabulary but rather a valuable and distinct skill in itself.

As writing skills are so highly valued in all levels of education and in work life, the learning and teaching of writing has frequently been the object of research. The present study will focus on teacher written feedback, since this particular feedback form has been and continues to be favored by teachers and, according to Hyland (2003: 179), teacher written feedback is also highly valued by second language writers. However, according to Montgomery and Baker (2007: 84), the majority of the researchers in this field have been interested in how teachers *should* provide written feedback but only a few studies have examined the *actual* teacher written feedback. Thus, there is an obvious need for a study concerning the reality of teacher written feedback and in particular its focuses, since other research has focused on aspects such as the ideals and drawbacks of teacher written feedback (Ferris 2007; Hyland 2003; Kroll 2003; Truscott 2007). Montgomery and Baker (2007), however, compare teachers' self-assessments to their actual performance in teacher written feedback. This study provides the present study with a basis for a hypothesis as they (2007:90) discovered that teachers tend to give little feedback on global issues, for example organization, and that teachers pay more attention to local issues, such as grammar and mechanics, throughout the writing process.

According to Weigle (2002:1), the increasing role of writing in second-language education should result in examining and establishing even more valid and effective ways of evaluating students' writing. A great deal of research is still needed in order to provide teachers with the best possible information about the best possible feedback, since it is the teacher's duty to provide the most helpful and extensive response possible. Ferris (2007:173) advises teachers to take this responsibility very seriously; as students are expected to invest their time and energy in writing essays, it is only reasonable to expect something from the teachers in return. It is the

student's right to get a response to essays and receive a concrete sign that the effort has been paid attention to.

One, however, begins to question the usefulness of teacher written feedback when examining prior research, because one encounters a great deal of criticism concerning this particular feedback form. For instance, Hyland and Hyland (2006: 84) criticize the quality of teacher written feedback by stating it to be "frequently misunderstood, vague, inconsistent and authoritarian, overly concerned with error and often functioning to appropriate, or take over, student texts by being too directive". Ferris (2007:166) goes perhaps even further by warning that teacher written feedback can in worst case scenarios be insensitive or even hostile.

Kroll (2003: 119-123) acknowledges that teachers as writing instructors have to invest a great deal of time and energy in responding to student texts and correcting them, but highlights the presumable failure of teacher written feedback in actually improving the students' writing. According to Kroll, students in worst case scenarios resent or even completely ignore the teacher's markings and comments on their papers. Hyland (2003: 179) is also worried about whether students even understand the corrections made by their teachers. Truscott (2007: 270) has expressed a similar view, as he discovered that based on controlled experiments there is merely a minor possibility that teacher written feedback actually has any benefits. Bitchener et al. (2005: 203) argue that written feedback on its own is not enough and that in order for the L2 writers to improve their writing they additionally need to be regularly exposed to oral corrective feedback.

Kroll (2003: 122) considers teacher written feedback to be at its most effective when used at intermediate stages of the writing process, but, since the writing of multiple drafts is so rarely used in foreign language teaching here in Finland, enforcing this strategy would require the revision of whole courses in order to

have the time and resources to enable the drafting, correcting and re-writing of multiple drafts. Kroll attempts to provide us with an optional feedback form by discussing the pros and cons of peer feedback. Peer feedback, for example, provides an authentic audience for students' writing and can therefore be seen as motivating, but at the same time students have their doubts concerning the peers' qualification to give feedback. Kroll discovered that when asked to choose between peer and teacher feedback the students strongly favored feedback from their teachers.

Another problematic and important issue in teacher written feedback is the choice of the feedback focus, i.e. teachers have to decide whether to emphasize form or content and whether to focus on the writing process or the significance of a correct final draft (Mäkinen 1995: 65). Teachers have to first of all be aware of this complexity and the key to overcoming this complexity and providing useful feedback is maintaining the balance of these different elements and this is called "instructional balance" (Raimes 1991, as quoted by Mäkinen 1995: 64). In addition to this, teachers also have to master means to provide helpful intervention instead of harmful appropriation (Ferris 2007: 167). Teachers, both pre-service and in-service, are, on Ferris's experience, often concerned about the amount of work and difficult decision-making involved in providing teacher written feedback and terrified of becoming "composition slaves".

Consequently, one can conclude that not only is the teacher written feedback and its usefulness debatable from the students' point of view but it is also a complicated and demanding process for the teachers. However, in spite of all the difficulties and drawbacks of teacher written feedback, it continues to be the most commonly used feedback form in all levels of education. Thus the teacher written feedback and its complexity undisputedly require further studying.

## 2.2 The six focuses of teacher written feedback

Hyland (2003: 3-18) examines what this debatable but nevertheless common feedback form consists of by presenting the guiding concepts in L2 writing teaching, i.e. the curriculum orientations. Based on these orientations, one can create a list of the main focuses of teacher written feedback, as it can be assumed that aspects of language actually taught in classrooms are the ones teachers focus on when correcting and responding to students' writing. The six main focuses of feedback deriving from Hyland's (2003: 3-18) curriculum orientations are focus on language structures, focus on text functions, focus on creative expression, focus on writing process, focus on content and lastly focus on genre. Based on this classification and Hyland's guidelines to distinguish these focuses, the teacher written feedback of the data was also divided into six. Hereby, as a result, is the theoretical viewpoint to examining actual teacher written feedback.

First of the six focuses is the focus on **language structures**, i.e. dissecting the student's linguistic knowledge, vocabulary choices and syntactic patterns. When considering foreign language teaching in general, these aspects often have the biggest priority. The next category is **text functions**, which includes the development of effective and varied paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting sentences. Constructing a functional and fluent text is frequently highlighted in native language teaching, but in foreign language classrooms its teaching is often neglected, and consequently students, who master it in their first language, may lack the tools in the foreign language. The third focus is on **creative expression**, the teaching of which involves allowing and encouraging students to develop their own personal style of writing and individual ideas. The starting point of this concept of teaching is the writer instead of the form, and therefore the teachers should alternatively respond to the actual realization rather than dwelling on formal errors.



Based on Hyland's curriculum orientations the next focus is the **writing process**, i.e. planning the essay, defining a rhetorical problem and presenting solutions. Teachers also seek for **content** in addition to mere form and function, and therefore the fifth focus is on the student's ideas and the information the student has managed to gather for the essay. Above all, this orientation highlights the fact that students must have something to write about. Lastly is the focus on **genre** and according to Hyland (2003: 18) it is very essential that students strive for achieving some communicative purpose when writing. Hyland additionally emphasizes the importance of becoming acquainted with social conventions to be able to convey understandable and efficient messages.

### **3 The Study**

#### 3.1 The Research questions and hypotheses

The fact that Hyland (2003: 3-18) provides us with a clear, theoretical ideal of what teacher written feedback *should* be comprised of, undisputedly raises questions. Firstly, one cannot help but wonder whether Hyland's ideal is reached in real-life teacher written feedback. Based on my personal experiences as a student receiving feedback on my writing, I would argue that teachers rarely have the time, energy or willingness to comment on all the six focuses Hyland (2003) presents. Thus secondly, one begins to ponder on what the hierarchy of the six focuses is if the ideal is not fully reached in reality. The present study aims to discover which focuses are paid attention to and to what extent. Again based on my personal experiences and the notions of teacher written feedback I predict that language structures are on top of the hierarchy as they are often the primary focus of foreign language teaching. I am also guessing that aspects such as genre and writing process are commented on the least, since they are rarely dealt with in the Finnish L2 classrooms. Thus I am assuming that the hierarchy of issues taught in Finnish upper secondary schools mirrors what the teachers

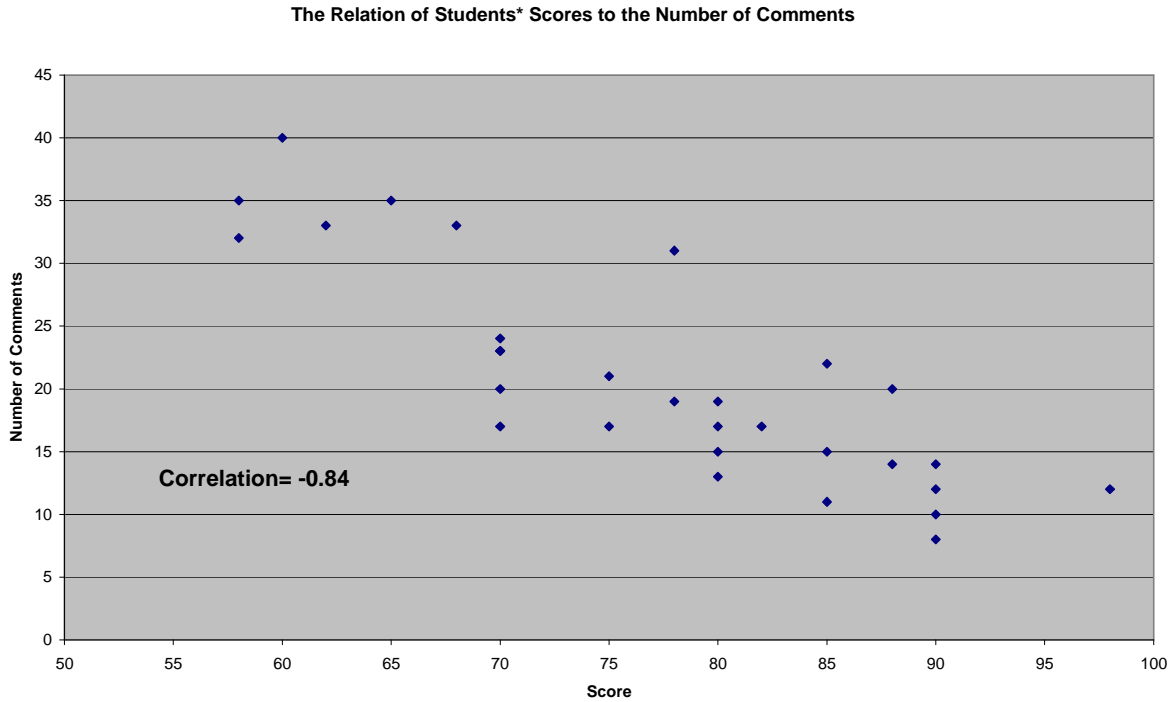
comment on in the essays. Lastly the present study strives for an understanding of the reasons behind the hierarchy of feedback focuses.

### 3.2 The data

The data of the present study consists of essays written by a group of Finnish upper secondary school students. In this group there were 30 students, 10 boys and 20 girls. The students were approximately 18 years old and they had been learning English on an average for 10 years, and the course where these essays were written was the last compulsory course for them before the English matriculation examination. This particular age group was chosen due to the fact that the students had been learning English for the longest period of time out of the students in the upper secondary school and it could thus be assumed that the teacher would comment on their writing from a wider point of view. The teacher of this course had graduated in 2002 and has since worked as a teacher for seven years almost continuously, except for two maternity leaves.

The essays used in the present study were a compulsory part of the course and their purpose was to prepare the students for the essay task in the English matriculation examination. Every student provided one essay for the study and thus the data consists of 30 essays. The length of an essay was on average approximately 200 words. The students were not required to produce multiple drafts and thus the essays in the present data are simultaneously the first and final drafts. In the 30 essays there were altogether 622 comments in Finnish, on average 20.7 comments per essay, written by the teacher. The lowest number of comments on one essay was 8 and the highest number was 40. The feedback types used in the present data were straight error corrections in the student's text and a summary of the pros and cons at the end of the essay. The essays were graded according to the scale, 0-99 points, used by the Finnish matriculation committee and there was a strong correlation of -0.84 between the students' scores and the number of comments (Figure 1). The student who scored only 58

received 35 comments, whereas the highest-scoring student with the score of 98 received only 12 comments. Thus in the present data the students' level of writing affects noticeably the number of comments.



**Figure 1** The Relation of Students' Scores to the Number of Comments

Presumable limitations of the present study may derive from the fact that the study examines feedback given only by one teacher. This particular factor undoubtedly narrows the possibilities to generalize from the results. The writing skills of the students whose essays are commented on in the present data represent, however, a rather wide range if the scores of the students are used as the measurement of language proficiency. As illustrated in Figure 1, the highest scoring student received the score of 98, whereas the lowest scoring student scored only 58 and thus there is a margin of 40 between the scores of the best and the worst student.

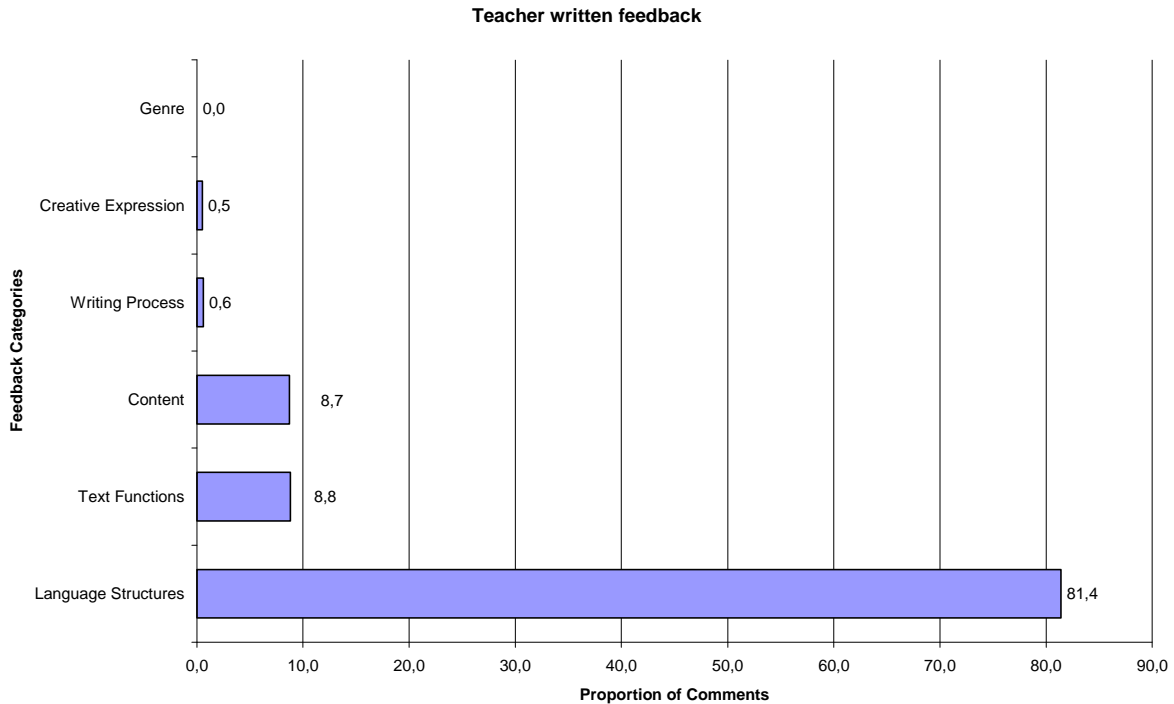
### 3.3 Methods of analysis

The 622 comments of the data were classified according to Hyland's (2003: 3-18) descriptions of the six focuses, i.e. **language structures, text functions, creative expression, writing process, content and genre**. Then the comments on each of the six categories were summed up and tabulated in order to illustrate the proportions of the six different categories and to discover the hierarchy between them.

## 4 Teacher written feedback in reality

### 4.1 The unbalanced division of teacher written feedback

As can be seen in Figure 2, the division of teacher written feedback is very unbalanced. The category that received the absolute majority of the comments in the present data was focus on **language structures**. The teacher commented on language structures with 506 comments, i.e. 81.4 % of all the given comments. The second most commented category was **text functions** with 55 comments. The gap between the first two categories is very wide as text functions received only 8.8 % of all the comments, i.e. circa only a ninth of the comments made on language structures. **Content** is the third most commented category in the present data, as it was paid attention to 54 times which is 8.7 % of the total number of comments. There is a rather wide gap also between the third and the fourth most commented categories, since only 4 comments were given on **writing process**, thus the fourth most commented category received a minor percentage of 0.6. Out of the six categories the category which received the second lowest number of comments was the focus on **creative expression** with 0.5 % of all the comments, i.e. only 3 comments in the entire data. The last of the focuses is **genre** with 0% of the comments, as the teacher made no direct comments or even indirect references to genre in the feedback.



**Figure 2** Teacher written feedback

One can conclude that there is an indisputably clear hierarchy in the teacher written feedback, as only one category received over a four-fifths of all the comments and the other categories were commented on to a distinctively lesser degree or even completely neglected. The 622 comments of the present data consisted of not only error correction or negative comments but also of comments on the students' strengths and progress. The teacher clearly strived for providing extensive feedback, as the number of negative and positive comments in the present data was rather equal. Since the teacher written feedback focuses on both the language aspects that the students already master and those they should practice more, one might reason that the teacher's feedback would mirror the students' writing skills and thus the concept of writing as a whole. However, the data of the present study unfortunately creates a rather constricted image of what language is and this image is very consistent with my hypothesis. The teacher indeed focused on local issues, such as grammar and mechanics, whereas

important global issues such as the writing process and genre were almost or fully ignored.

## 4.2 The six feedback focuses from the viewpoint of the present data

### 4.2.1 Language structures

When considering foreign language teaching in general, language structures often have the first priority. Therefore, it is no wonder that when giving feedback the main focus is additionally on language structures. Thus, not surprisingly, the teachers' first priority in the present data when giving feedback was undisputedly the focus on language structures.

The teacher commented on the students' skills in grammar by for example marking their errors in the text and providing the students with a correct form or utterance. The teacher additionally summarized the students' grammatical and lexical strengths and weaknesses in the form of lists at the end of the essays. She used for instance the following statements: *monipuolisesti rakenteita* 'varied structures' and *tekstistä näkee, että hallitset kielen* 'the text shows that you master the language' or *sanajärjestys kerrattava* 'the word order must be revised' and *pahoja virheitä verbirakenteissa* 'severe errors in verb structures'. In addition to correcting the biggest grammar errors and the most glaring incorrect word choices, the teacher marked even the smallest spelling and punctuation errors, which, therefore, creates a notion of striving toward completely flawless language. In the data of the present study the teacher repeatedly demanded *meticulousness* ('huolellisuutta') from the students. According to Hyland and Hyland (2006: 87), many studies have proved that students expect their teachers to point out their grammatical errors and, thus, it can be assumed that this accuracy is wanted by both the students and teachers.

It is, however, worth pondering on what actually generates this desire for complete accuracy in foreign language learning and teaching. On one hand, the flawless language use is a guiding ideal for learning a foreign language, but, on the other hand, not even native speakers are able to use completely accurate language in all situations. Perfection very rarely exists in language use and thus it could be claimed that there is little point in setting it as an objective. When considering communication in a foreign language, it is additionally essential to emphasize the importance of above all becoming understood by the people one is communicating with. In my opinion, it is significantly better if students are willing and brave enough to express their ideas, feelings and intentions more freely and vividly, even if that occurs at the expense of complete accuracy. I fully concur with Hyland (2003: 4) in terms of his concern about accuracy having the utmost priority at the cost of communicative content. I think that the meaning should have the first priority and the language structures should be the means in conveying the wanted message. The data of the present study, however, sends a rather depressing message of what is valued in the communication in a foreign language, as over 80 % of the feedback focused on accuracy of language.

The course where the essays of the present data were written was the last course for the students before their English matriculation examination. I recall that during my last English courses in the upper secondary school there was an even greater pressure from the teachers to specifically focus on accuracy in our writing. The teachers justified this by stating that the censors of the Finnish matriculation committee valued particularly correct language structures and thus we were repeatedly advised to keep our texts simple in order to avoid any errors. Perhaps one of the main reasons for the high percentage of the comments on language structures in the present data is the fact that the teacher wants the students to succeed in the examination and therefore pays careful attention to the same language aspects that the censors are assumed to focus on. It is worthwhile to consider the usefulness of the matriculation examination's criteria for good writing, as that complete accuracy seldom exists in real-life communication. It is

additionally reasonable to question the position of this particular examination, since it appears to have an enormous effect on teaching of foreign languages. The matriculation examination of course functions as an important evidence of the students' language proficiency. However, the focus of the teaching should be on improving the students' communicative competence instead of solely preparing for certain examinations.

#### 4.2.2 Text functions

The category that was the second most commented was text functions with 8.8%, as the teacher gave altogether 55 comments on this aspect of writing. It is, however, worth emphasizing that even though this was the second most commented category after the focus on language structures, there is still a noticeable difference of over 70% between the first two categories. In the data of the present study the teacher commented on the text functions with following sorts of comments: *aloitus- ja lopetuskappale voisivat olla selkeämmät* 'the first and the last paragraphs could be more clear', *lopetuskappale puuttuu* 'there is no conclusion', *ensimmäinen kappale johdattelee hyvin aiheeseen* 'the first paragraph introduces the topic well' and *hyvä kappalejako* 'good division into paragraphs'.

When considering that the teacher paid such a great amount of attention to language structures, it is not surprising that she additionally commented relatively often on text functions as both focuses represent a mechanical aspect of writing. Hyland (2003: 7) warns teachers that "an exclusive focus on form or function means that writing is detached from the practical purposes and personal experiences of the writer". The fact that approximately 90% of the feedback in the present data is given purely on these two mechanical aspects of writing, evidently indicates that this particular teacher ranks the form of the students' messages above the students' ideas and thoughts. According to Hyland (2003: 7) this should not be the case, since foreign language teachers are expected to provide their students with more extensive guidance instead of merely



presenting writing as a series of certain patterns that the students have to remember and master.

### 4.2.3 Content

The third most commented feedback focus was the focus on content which received 54 comments, i.e. 8.7% of all the given comments in the present data. It is rather unfortunate that this percentage is this low, as naturally the whole text, i.e. 100%, consists of the students' presentation of their thoughts and ideas. In comparison to all the given comments on the mechanical aspects, content received an unreasonably minimal amount of attention. This might be due to the fact that there is a contradiction in providing students with feedback on the content. On one hand, teachers are expected to make suggestions and evaluate ideas, but, on the other hand, Kroll (2003: 124) warns teachers not to "appropriate (take over) students' texts by being too authoritative and direct in their feedback...Such appropriative behavior can frustrate, demotivate and otherwise disempower student writers". Apparently the teacher of the present study decided not to commit herself on commenting on the content, as the number of comments was rather negligible. Only a few times did the teacher more specifically comment on the content by asking for more information with some guideline questions.

The majority of the given comments were fairly superficial and not very precise, as the teacher merely used comments such as: *suppea/ kattava aiheenkäsittely* 'condensed/extensive discussion'. This basically creates the image that as long as the students are writing something in the foreign language and thus providing the teacher with evidence of their current writing skills the teacher is pleased. I, however, think that if the students are expected to be able and willing to use their language skills also outside the classrooms the teachers should make them feel that their texts are comprehensively acknowledged instead of merely evaluated. Since the students invest their time and energy in producing ideas

and thoughts for their essays by using a foreign language as the tool it would be only reasonable that the content should receive some attention and not only the tool.

#### 4.2.4 Writing process

The focus on writing process received 4 comments out of the total of 622, i.e. only a marginal 0.6%, and even the given 4 comments seemed rather unhelpful for the students. The teacher used empty statements such as: *tätä ei ole suunniteltu kunnolla* 'this is not properly planned' and *vähäinen suunnittelu paistaa läpi* 'exiguous planning shines through'. I would assume that the students do not benefit a great deal from these types of comments. Firstly, the students who have not invested in the planning of the essay probably already know it and I think that a more precise and practical approach would be required in order for the students to improve their skills with the writing process. Perhaps the teacher should emphasize the importance of the writing process to make the students more aware of its significance. In addition to this it might be worthwhile to draw the students' attention to possible planning strategies, for example mind maps and free-writing. Secondly, the students who had already mastered the writing process in this particular essay should additionally be made more aware of the positive effects of their careful planning and thus they would be encouraged to devote their time and energy to planning also in the future. According to Hyland (2003: 12), it is the teachers' duty to enhance the improvement of their students' metacognitive skills, i.e. their abilities to reflect on their writing strategies.

A factor that may partly explain the lack of the teacher's attention to the writing process is the fact that an essential procedure of the most widely accepted model of writing processes, i.e. planning-writing-reviewing framework (Hyland 2003:11), was not used when writing the essays of the present data. The students were not required to re-write their essays and thus one cannot count on the students to review their essays after receiving feedback. The teacher presumably

wanted to save her and the students' time and energy for the other essay that was written later on in the same course. I would have personally as a teacher focused more thoroughly on the processing of these essays instead of asking the students to produce two separate ones. This way the students would have been given a chance to properly take into account the teacher written feedback and truly benefit from it. In addition to this, the teacher would have been able to review if the students had truly grasped the key ideas of her written feedback and the teacher could have avoided the possible worst-case scenario presented by Kroll (2003:120). According to Kroll it is possible that some students may resent or even fully ignore the teacher written feedback.

#### 4.2.5 Creative expression

The second least commented category in the present data was the focus on creative expression. The teacher gave only 3 comments which is 0.5% of all the given comments and once again even the given comments were rather hollow, as the teacher merely expressed that the language was *versatile* ('monipuolista') and *lively* ('elävää'). According to Hyland (2003:8), it is essential that teachers make the effort to comment on students' creative expression and hereby generate the students' self-awareness of their social position and literate possibilities. In practice it clearly demands a great deal of time and energy from the teacher to be able to get acquainted with every student's personal writing and to be able to support their individual development. The present study indicates that there apparently is a deficiency of time and energy, as the data shows that the amount of teachers' focus on creative expression is rather insignificant.

In my opinion the teacher should make some sort of reference to the students' individuality as writers. Many students may consider writing a very personal issue and thus the teacher should encourage them and support their personal style of writing. This would undoubtedly boost the students' confidence as writers and Hyland (2003:9) claims that students would become less reluctant to

be creative and more willing to take risks for instance through free writing. I personally put a higher premium on the fact that students are eager to write than on accuracy. I am most definitely not stating that accuracy is trivial in writing, but I am suggesting that instead of merely requiring perfect language from the students, the teacher would additionally motivate the students by informing them about the expressive possibilities of writing. In consequence, one could assume that the students interested in creative expression would on their own initiative be additionally eager to widen their knowledge on language structures in order to enhance their expression.

#### 4.2.6 Genre

The last of the six feedback focuses is the focus on genre which in the present data was completely neglected, as no comments were given on genre. This may indicate that in addition to practicing writing, the main purpose of essay writing in schools is to provide evidence of the student's proficiency level in order for the teacher to give a grade. Consequently, it could be claimed that the students are not communicating any specific messages and that the teacher is not an authentic audience but rather solely a reviewer.

The lack of comments on genre may be a considerable reason for the overall imbalance of the teacher written feedback in the present data. According to Hyland (2004: 22), different aspects of writing, such as grammar, process, content and function, can be integrated with the help of genre-based teaching. Thus, one could state that the abandonment of genre presumably hinders the more extensive and integrated view of language and as a result is a narrow scope of feedback. I suggest that foreign language teachers would adopt a more genre-based approach to teaching writing. The teachers could explicitly and systematically explain the ways writing works to communicate (Hyland 2004:6), i.e. the students would be made more aware of for example certain language structures, functions and procedures typical for different genres. In my opinion

this approach has two major benefits. Firstly, it relates the students' writing more closely to real-life writing, as it introduces the students to authentic ways of communicating, instead of asking them to write merely for the sake of providing evidence of their skills. Secondly, genres create a clear framework for both the students and teachers. Both parties are familiar with the genre-specific characteristics of language and thus both the teachers and students are more aware of what is expected from the students. This facilitates the students' writing, as they know what aspects are important for the genre in question. In addition, it is easier for the teachers to comment on the students' writing when they can focus on how well the students' managed to use the genre guidelines to convey their thoughts and ideas, i.e., focus on the students' ability to really communicate.

### 4.3 Discussion

According to Kroll (2003: 124), "[b]oth L1 and L2 survey studies on student reactions to teacher feedback have reported consistent findings that students appreciate clear, concrete, specific feedback." If this information is applied to the findings of the present study, one can state that the only category measuring up the given requirements of the students is the focus on language structures, whereas all the other focuses were mostly or even completely ignored.

Language structures are an essential foundation of language proficiency and thus often in the main focus in foreign language teaching. Textbooks are filled with exercises concerning grammar and vocabulary and these issues are typically examined in foreign language tests. Therefore, from this perspective the feedback of the present data is however successful, as it admittedly focuses on what has been taught and practiced in the classroom. Ferris (2007: 167, 170) reinforces the success of the present data's feedback by stating that there is no sense in addressing every single aspect in every single essay and Ferris puts an emphasis on "a selective and prioritized approach to responding". Montgomery and Baker

(2007: 93) have discovered that students are actually pleased with receiving feedback on only local issues and that they are not bothered if global issues are neglected. Thus based on the statements of Ferris (2007) and Montgomery and Baker (2007), one could consider the feedback of the present data as adequate and satisfying. I personally identify with the presented statements to a certain degree, since as a future teacher, I am not planning on completely exhausting myself with giving feedback on everything and I am naturally aiming at providing my students with feedback they consider helpful.

However, when it comes to teacher written feedback my biggest concern is the unbalanced image of language that for instance the present data seems to represent. The structure-orientated feedback may be due to the facts that firstly, the teacher focuses on giving feedback on language structures, since teaching them is emphasized in the syllabus and mastering them is highly valued by the Finnish matriculation committee. Secondly, the students are taught from the beginning to mainly strive for correct language structures in second language writing and the students are basically guided to prioritize accurate language even at the cost of other language aspects, such as creativity or content. Thus it is no wonder that also the students value feedback on local issues.

## **5 Conclusion**

The present study had three prime aims. Firstly, to examine if Hyland's (2003: 3-18) ideal applies to the actual teacher written feedback. Secondly, to reveal a possible hierarchy of the six different feedback focuses and thirdly, to discuss the reasons for this hierarchy. I discovered that in reality the comprehensive and extensive feedback is replaced by a rather unilateral feedback where language structures have the utmost priority. Based on previous research and my personal experiences, accuracy of language is valued by both the teachers and students, and therefore, the feedback of the present data can be viewed successful, even if it fails to measure up to Hyland's ideal.

It is worth bearing in mind that the present data consists of feedback given by only one teacher. In addition, even though Hyland (2003: 3-18) provides clear and detailed guidelines for distinguishing the six feedback focuses, the categorization was the result of only one person's interpretations of the teacher's comments. Thus one must be cautious about making too wide generalizations, and further research concerning the reality of teacher written feedback is unquestionably needed. However, if one assumes that the hierarchy visible in the present data is a prevailing feature in giving feedback also in general, one is, in my opinion, confronted with a more severe issue than inadequate feedback. I think that further research should examine the functionality and meaningfulness of the overly structure-based view of language and in particular the consequences of emphasizing grammatical and lexical accuracy in communication. Students may become reluctant to communicate with their possibly insufficient competence if even their smallest errors are constantly pointed out to them.

The unbalanced view of language in the present data suggests that the overall focus of foreign language teaching must be taken into a careful consideration. Teachers in their everyday lives and researchers in their studies have to question the profound purpose and usefulness of emphasizing merely local issues of language instead of providing students with a wider scope. Teachers mediate to students their notions of what language learning is and more importantly what it means to know a language. Based on the present study, it seems that students are sent a message of structural perfection being the first priority. One can ponder whether it is of value to learn language structures but lack the courage in real-life to actually produce them out of fear of not being completely accurate.

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