

**TEACHER WRITTEN FEEDBACK:  
Teachers' perceptions of given feedback**

Candidate's thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä - Abstract</p> <p>Kirjallinen tuottaminen on vakiinnuttanut asemansa osana englannin opiskelua suomalaisissa kouluissa. Erityisen tärkeä rooli osana kirjoitusprosessia ja opiskelijan kirjoittajana kehittymistä on opettajan antamalla kirjallisella palautteella. Opettajien näkökulmasta tehtävä ei kuitenkaan ole helppo, ja siksi on tarpeen kysyä, vastaavatko opettajien omat käsitykset hyvästä palautteesta heidän opiskelijoille antamaansa palautetta - tai kääntäen: onko opettajien antama palaute todellakin sitä, mitä he uskovat antavansa? Tässä tutkimuksessa kaksi lukion englanninopettajaa vastasi kyselylomakkeen kysymyksiin hyvästä kirjallisesta palautteesta ja omista palautteenantotavoistaan. Molemmilta opettajilta myös kerättiin yhden abiturienttiryhmän kirjoittamia ylioppilaskokeen harjoitusaineita, joihin tutkimukseen osallistuva opettaja oli kirjoittanut palautteensa ja jotka hän oli arvostellut. Opettajien kyselylomakevastauksia ja oppilasaineisiin kirjoittamaa palautetta vertailtiin ja saatiin selville, että yleensä palaute ja opettajien käsitykset vastasivat toisiaan palautteen määrään ja sisältöön liittyen, mutta he myös säästelivät kehusanojaan, vaikka uskoivat antavansa paljon positiivista palautetta ja tunnustusta hyvistä suorituksista.</p>	
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## 1 Introduction

Written compositions have for long been an essential part of English teaching at most levels in Finnish schools. From the elementary school forth, students are asked to write compositions, which will, after having been finished, be assessed by their teachers. Different teachers trust in different methodologies in terms of responding to the student texts. The scale is wide: some emphasize the importance of process writing, whereas others might prefer reading only one final draft of the given assignment; while some teachers settle for minimal marking, others may prefer pointing out each error that is found, using coded terminology or giving corrective suggestions to replace the original ideas. The teacher decides him/herself what is important and how the texts will be responded to, and the way the feedback is given may have been built up slowly by experience. However, it is possible that the teacher's routine can be a negative factor as well: it is yet unclear if a teacher who gives the feedback continuously and habitually in the same way still keeps responding to the student essays as he/she intends to do it. A potential difference between the teachers' intended written feedback and its aim, and the actual responding outcome and its effect on student writing has not aroused the researchers' interest yet. The present study explores the correspondence between teacher written feedback on student compositions and two teachers' own perceptions of it by comparing the teachers' interview form answers to a number of student-written compositions on which they have given feedback themselves.

## 2 Feedback on student written texts

### 2.1 Objects and goals of teacher-given feedback

When working with student written texts, teachers must form their own opinion about whether the text is good or not. However, it might not be easy to determine how each piece of writing should be graded and what aspects should be paid attention to in teacher response. Therefore the text should be divided in portions which would be responded to separately. Hyland (2003: 2) makes a division in seven focuses of L2 writing teaching: language structures, text functions, creative expression, composing process, content, and genre, and argues that no single characteristic as itself can be a marker of good writing: each text is dependent on its context. He also states that because texts always represent a certain communicative setting, the response should not treat mere accuracy and explicitness of expression, but rather all the divisions of the text (Hyland 2003: 185).

The goal of giving feedback may vary: the assessor may want to give writers a grade on a single product, or the piece of writing may be just one draft in a long-term writing process. Feedback can be made either formative or summative: the former type responds to where the writer is doing well or badly, and the latter sums up what the writer has been learning so far. According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR 2011), formative assessment is “an ongoing process of gathering information on the extent of learning, on strengths and weaknesses, which the teacher can feed back into their course planning and the actual feedback they give learners” and it is “often used in a very broad sense so as to include non-quantifiable information from questionnaires and

consultations". Summative assessment in turn, as defined in CEFR, "sums up attainment at the end of the course with a grade", "is not necessarily proficiency assessment", and is often "norm-referenced, fixed-point, [and] achievement assessment." (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2011: 186.)

CEFR (2011: 205-207) also suggests a set of guidelines for developing descriptors. These include positiveness (describing what the learner can do instead of what he/she cannot), definiteness (avoiding vagueness and providing real distinctions between different levels), clarity, brevity, and independence ("having meaning only relative to the formulation of other descriptors on the scale"). The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools (*Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet* 2003:100) guides teachers' operation in terms of assessment even less: it states only that all fields of language proficiency should be taken into account in accordance with each course's emphases. In addition, the curriculum advises that the writing skill level which Finnish upper secondary school students with A-syllabus English should reach is B2.1. This level requires that students, for instance, can write clear and detailed texts about several topics; can write more formal social messages, such as directions and applications; can express knowledge and insights effectively and comment on others' opinions; possess a large vocabulary and linguistic means to compose a clear and coherent text; and manage spelling, use of grammar and use of punctuation rather well, and errors should not cause misunderstanding (*Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet* 2003: 243).

The feedback can be reasoned in different ways as well. Evaluation by placement allocates learners to appropriate classes, diagnostic evaluation is carried out by showing the learners the positive and negative aspects in their writing, and reasoning the evaluation by achievement means that the progress achieved during the course is demonstrated to the writers. Reasoning by performance includes information about writers' ability in certain tasks, whereas proficiency-reasoned

evaluation assesses students' general level of competence. (Hyland 2003: 214.) Different reasons of feedback should be chosen based on the learners, learning goals, or contents of learning.

## 2.2 Responding effectively

It is not always clear how the feedback should be given to maximize its effect and ensure that it is worth giving. Ferris (2007: 168) presents a few general principles of responding to student writing to be followed during the feedback process. She suggests that the teacher should not be the only responder, but, for instance, peer feedback should be provided as well. She also recommends that every single mistake in each student paper need not be responded to, but the texts should rather be approached selectively; a text is a product of a student after all, and thus there is no point in advising how to improve the outcome so that it would be more professional-like. Moreover, selectiveness in error correction serves the long-term aim of improving student writing skills, which perfecting one piece of writing probably does not. Hyland (2003: 188) argues that there must be a balance between positive commentary and critique, and positive comments should be handled with care; empty praise makes the feedback sound insincere, whereas a lack of them may affect the students' attitudes to writing and the receptivity of the feedback. On the other hand, the expressed critique should be both encouraging and constructive. Balance in the personality of feedback is also needed: teachers must have reasonable principles which they follow in their response, even as they have to treat each student as an individual writer (Ferris 2007: 168).

As Ferris et al. (2012: 3) point out, written corrective feedback (WCF) has in several studies proved to be more effective when it is *focused*; in other words, feedback which is provided for specific error types is more valuable to its receiver than *unfocused* or comprehensive correction, which intervenes with all found errors in the text. Also Bitchener (2012: 354) shows that in a number of studies carried out

with learners at lower intermediate to advanced levels, test groups with focused WCF provided outperformed the control group which had not received the same treatment. In this light it seems that specific error correction is worth the time. In addition to focused WCF, Ferris et al. (2012: 3) go on to mention another concept vital for effective feedback. She states that in longitudinal observation indirect error correction may be more valuable than direct one, which means that the teacher should call the error to the writer's attention but not give the correct form.

According to Bitchener et al. (2005: 202), ESL teachers should provide learners with both oral and written feedback on rule-governed, "more treatable" linguistic errors, such as the past simple tense and the definite article. In their study it was revealed that upper intermediate level L2 writers can, when provided with regular oral and written feedback, improve their writing accuracy regarding rule-governed linguistic features. They also found out that direct oral feedback combined with direct written feedback proved to be more beneficial than direct written feedback alone (Bitchener et al. 2005: 201). It is, therefore, worthwhile to offer an opportunity for oral feedback in addition to the written response.

Teachers should also consider what kind of feedback the writers might want. Each student as an individual learner has different needs; thus the type of feedback surely matters. It might be rational to ask students personally what they expect from their feedback. According to Hyland (2003: 179), students tend to prefer commentary on ideas and overall organization at the beginning of the writing process, and in the latter drafts they appreciate observations on language and grammar. Considering the form of the feedback, written commentary by the teacher is perhaps the most used way of expressing it, because it is considered immediate and relevant. However, many more may serve the writer as well, as Hyland (2003: 181-183) points out. Rubrics may be useful when reasoning the overall assessment and grading factors; minimal marking might be more efficient in improving the writer's rewriting and error responding skills; taped commentary



or electronic feedback may precipitate the assessor's work if there are many texts to respond to. Overall, it is always worth asking for the writers' preferences on feedback.

What also seems to matter is the student's own activity in responding to teacher feedback. Chandler (2003) examined the effect of students' revision of their own writings based on teacher given feedback and found out that over a period of ten weeks the accuracy of writing improved significantly more with those students who were required to correct their own errors than with those who were not. In addition, the improvement in accuracy did not result in decline of fluency. However, if students did not revise their compositions based on feedback, having teacher mark the errors was equivalent to having no feedback at all, for in this case no increase in accuracy was reported. If students made the corrections themselves, their new pieces of writing became more accurate without a reduction in fluency. (Chandler 2003: 290.)

Nevertheless, not all studies consider error correction effectual or useful. As Truscott (2007: 271) concludes his study, the effectiveness of correction is clearly relevant to teaching, and research has found correction to be a clear and dramatic failure. Ultimately, the last decision of what will be corrected and how it will be done is up to the teacher, and when correction is carried out inadvertently, the result may be that time is wasted and the correction is not fruitful but rather counterproductive for the students.

### **2.3 Giving explicit feedback**

Teachers can either write precise guidelines about what had been written wrong and how the error should be corrected or only give a cue of what sort of error was made and where; the cue may be a code of the error type in the margin, or an

underlining under the error. According to Ferris and Roberts (2001: 176-178), no immediate advantage to more explicit coded feedback for student writers was noticed. They observed that there were substantial differences in the editing success between students who had been receiving feedback and students who had not, though there was no significant difference in editing success between students who received coded feedback and students who only had their errors underlined. However, teachers must be aware of the level of explicitness of their feedback: too inaccurate feedback is not advisable either, since it may result in student frustration (Ferris and Roberts 2001: 178). On the other hand, explicit CF with specific terms or other metalinguistic information may, for *some* students, be more valuable than unlabeled (implicit) one (Ferris et al. 2012: 3).

## **2.4 Teacher perceptions of feedback**

Although providing one's students' pieces of writing with sufficient amount of feedback of a good quality might not be the easiest task for language teachers, it is not considerably easier to judge what kind of feedback one actually gives. Montgomery and Baker (2007) studied teacher and student perceptions of teacher written feedback and found out that there were discrepancies both in the actual feedback and in teachers' own conceptions about it: they argue that all students are not given the same amount of feedback, and generally students perceived receiving more feedback than their teachers perceived giving. In addition, teachers perceived giving less feedback on local issues (grammar, mechanics) and more feedback on global issues (ideas, content, organization, vocabulary) than they actually did (Montgomery and Baker 2007: 91-94).

Similar discrepancies were presented by Lee (2010), who examined the mismatches between teachers' beliefs and their written feedback practices, and found a number of them. Firstly, she discovered that although teachers believe that good writing

depends not only on accuracy but also on organization and development of ideas, they still tend to pay most attention to language form. Secondly, teachers seem to prefer selective marking, but end up marking errors comprehensively. In addition, it was found that their practices included correcting and locating errors for students, using error codes, giving scores or grades, responding mainly to weaknesses, and preferring one-shot writing over process writing, even though their beliefs about these issues did not back them up. (Lee 2010: 13-22.)

### **3 The study**

#### **3.1 Research questions**

Students who study English as a foreign language must be provided with proper feedback to help them learn from their mistakes, to prevent them from repeating their mistakes, and to encourage them to use the language boldly. Their written products are usually revised and graded to have concrete proof of how they are progressing. However, students may often wonder why they were given such feedback as they were, and question the principles according to which the composition was graded. Teachers will, if asked for reasoning for the feedback, certainly have an argumentation on their grading principles, but it is not clear whether they really follow their own philosophy in practice. To search for clarification for this issue, the present study is trying to find answers to the question *how teacher written feedback in reality responds to what teachers themselves find it is*. To survey this, we also need to know the answers to the next two sub-questions: how do teachers prefer carrying out the feedback, and what kinds of responses they actually give.

### 3.2 Data collection measures

In the present study, two English teachers of upper secondary school, both native Finnish speakers, were involved in a survey to gather their own perceptions about giving written feedback on student compositions. The surveys were carried out by questionnaire forms with ten open-ended questions which the teachers answered alone, without the presence of their interviewer. In the questionnaires the teachers were asked, for instance, if they think they provide students with sufficient feedback, what aspects of language get special attention, what they consider good feedback, and what aspects the overall grade consists of. They were not asked about possible differences between their own feedback in theory and practice. In addition, both teachers were asked to prepare ten to twenty student writings with written teacher responses in them to be collected for the analysis.

According to Alanen (2011: 148-149), a survey questionnaire with open questions is a suitable measure to gather information when the number of participants is small and the study aims to describe the participants' own perceptions. She also suggests that such surveys offer deeper level of information than statistical analyses do. Similarly in the present study, a research survey with open-ended questions was found the best way to explore the teachers' own thoughts of their own feedback, as the number of participating teachers was small ( $N = 2$ ) and structured or half-structured questions could have constrained the teachers' answers. Furthermore, organizing an interview would have been too laborious in a study of this small scale. In the present study, the comparison of the teachers' answers and their actual feedback in student writings was seen as the best and the only way to explore distinctions and conformities between the teachers' theory and practice, and no need for larger quantitative analysis was found, as that was not the main goal of the study.

There were only two teachers interviewed in order to keep the amount of data small enough, but to have at least some variation within the answers. Before getting the participants, my purpose was to involve one largely experienced teacher, and one with not as much experience, because I believed this sort of setting might produce more variation both in the questionnaire answers and the contrast between teacher perceptions and their actual performance. However, finally I got two extensively experienced teachers involved, which can be seen as an emphasis on the teachers' routine in giving feedback.

The questionnaire was not piloted, because there was, due to the difficulty of the search for participants, no time for doing it. The questions were shown to a third teacher and reformed slightly on the basis of her feedback. The questionnaire forms were sent to both participating teachers, and the student writings were collected at the same time with the finished questionnaires. In terms of the reliability of the study, I would have preferred to hand out the questionnaires only after collecting the student compositions. However, there were personal and course schedules to cope with, and thus I was not able to collect the student texts before handing out the question forms, which may have had a minor effect on the way the teachers responded to the texts. There were 12 compositions from teacher A and 24 compositions from teacher B altogether. All compositions were collected unnamed, and had been written by Finnish upper secondary school third-year students, all of them being 18 years or older. The students were not interviewed. Each composition had been inspected, marked and rated by a teacher before the collection and analysis.

### **3.3 Categories of analysis**

All teacher written remarks in student compositions were categorized and counted. They were not classified by Hyland's division into seven linguistic

aspects, because most remarks would have been fitted in the same category, or even in several categories, which would have made the categorization problematic and unreliable. Instead, the teacher markings were divided into following five categories: Comments on word- or phrase-level grammar mistakes, comments on sentence-level grammar mistakes, comments on spelling, comments on word choice and expression, and comments on content. Additionally, the possible positive (encouraging) or negative (criticizing) tone of commentary and advice for further revision were compared to the teacher's answers in the questionnaire form. The categorization of the teacher remarks in student writings was used to form a general view of the teachers' feedback, but due to its difficulty and possible inaccuracy, it was not used as the main focus of analysis. Instead, more weight was put on analyzing the teachers' interview answers and how their ideas were carried out in practice.

## **4 Teachers' perceptions and the quality of given feedback**

### **4.1 Questionnaire form data**

The teachers were asked the following ten questions in order to have an insight into their feedback pedagogy and how they believed they were responding to student writing.

1. Do you feel that you provide all students with sufficient feedback? If not, why?
2. Do you feel that you provide all students with equal feedback and is that your aim? Why? / Why not?
3. In what relation do you aim to give encouraging feedback and criticism? Why?
4. Do you feel that any of the fields of writing (structures, text functions,

expression, or construction of ideas, for instance) is a particularly important object of feedback or do you aim to have a balance between different aspects? Why so?

5. Do you aim to take notice of every mistake? How do you mark them?
6. How do you usually mark your feedback on student texts? Do you treat each paper similarly? Why so?
7. Do you give other than written feedback? How?
8. What scale of grades do you use?
9. What issues do you consider the most essential when giving feedback?
10. What issues do you consider the most essential factors of the grade?

According to the answers gathered by the questionnaire form, Teacher A supposes not giving enough feedback for all students. This is reasoned by lack of time: precise written feedback for every student would take too much of the teacher's time. Teacher A would also prefer oral feedback, but she argues that her students do not always have time for discussing the piece of writing in concern. In addition, the amount of feedback by Teacher A is not divided evenhandedly for all of her students, but the most advanced students are given more feedback than those at a lower class stage. Teacher A does not emphasize the role of encouraging or criticizing feedback, but notes that she both encourages and gives corrective suggestions for weaker students, and gives both credit and criticism to successful ones.

Teacher A reports that she does not consider all different aspects of language in her feedback; she comments on language structure matters and good ideas, and states that grammar errors have been found where red pen has been used. Furthermore, she aims at responding to all errors that are made, and makes it by underlining the error with red, or by adding a lacking component above. She also utilizes the oral feedback to tell how the mistaken structure should have been written. Altogether,

spoken response is, according to Teacher A, the best way to give feedback. The most essential issue in the feedback giving is to be honest, she says. That is, to point out what was done well or poorly, where the student had succeeded, and to what should be paid extra attention. She thinks that the feedback should be encouraging and supportive, and goes on to say that the most important factors of the overall grade are the text's communicative functions, logic, originality, versatility of expression and the correctness of language.

Similarly to Teacher A, also Teacher B supposes not giving enough feedback for all students, mainly due to the lack of time, which partly results from relatively large groups. However, she reports striving for equal and encouraging feedback for all students in order to motivate and encourage them to do better, and criticizing them when they are not doing their best. According to Teacher B, she does not usually emphasize any certain aspect of language in her feedback, but rather assesses student writings rather pervasively. She also goes on to say that for some reason parsing the text has lately suffered a decline, which has resulted in increased commentary on that issue. She says that she usually marks and corrects the errors with a red pen as she reads the text, and occasionally adds the concerned grammar rule in the margin or in the end. She also reports writing remarks and positive commentary below the text, but not in every text, depending on the applicable time. It also turned out that spoken feedback on student compositions' contents and linguistic features is an important part of her process of feedback giving.

The most essential point in teacher's feedback is, according to Teacher B, to be able to provide such feedback which guides the students to progress as writers so that their products would be of good language, and contain rich, versatile vocabulary and structures and a personal content. Thus it is not a surprise that she stated usually focusing on linguistic matters more thoroughly than on content-related matters. As to Teacher B, these same issues are the most important factors of a



grade: the language, its rich, versatile vocabulary and versatile structures are the central point.

Evidently there were several issues which both participating teachers had in common. Both of them believed they did not provide their students with sufficient feedback due to lack of time. Both of them strived to treat all of their students evenhandedly, though Teacher A admitted giving the most feedback for students who were preparing for their matriculation examinations and the least for the first-year students. Both teachers believed that unsuccessful texts should be responded to with encouraging feedback. They both mentioned that they use a red pen to mark and correct errors, they are accustomed to giving oral feedback to their students, and that they use the same grading scale which is used by the Finnish Matriculation Examination Board (YTL), although not always. Finally, both of them find versatile expression one of the main factors of the grade.

## 4.2 Feedback on student writings

To convert the actual feedback into numbers, Teacher A's commentary on student papers consisted of 167 comments in 12 compositions: a majority, 89 out of 167 comments (53%), concerned grammar mistakes, and about three fourths (67 out of 89) of all commentary on grammar issues concerned word-level mistakes, such as the use of articles, prepositions or pronouns. The rest one fourth concerned grammar mistakes on sentence level, such as word order or proper use of auxiliaries. Commentary on spelling consisted of 25 comments out of 167 (15%) and commentary on word choices and expression of 30 comments out of 167 (18%) comments. Only 23 comments (13%) concerned the contents of the compositions. Teacher A did not manifest straight criticism or reproach but rather expressed them as positively toned suggestions, for example "*muista aina allekirjoittaa mielipiteesi*", (always remember to sign your letters), "*ole varovainen relat.pronominin what kohdalla*" (be careful with the relative pronoun *what*) and

*“muista, ettet erota objektia ja pääverbiä”* (remember not to separate the object from the main verb). Praise, support, or other commentary with a positive tone was found in all of the 12 texts.

Teacher B’s commentary on student papers showed that 288 out of her 442 markings (65%) were about grammar mistakes, and 225 out of these 288 (78%) concerned word- or phrase-level errors, such as mistakes with prepositions, articles, verb forms, plural and pronouns. The remaining 63 grammar corrections dealt with such errors as word order mistakes, inadequate sentences and incomplete structures. The next biggest category of markings dealt with spelling errors, consisting of 80 markings out of 442 (18%). 61 comments (14%) focused on word choices or expression, such as improper lexical items, and only 13 comments out of 442 (3%) were given in response to content issues. In all 24 student papers there were altogether very few clearly positive or negative comments: there were eight encouraging comments, such as *“Hyvä lopetus!”* (Good ending!) and *“Hyvä jäsenitys”* (Good parsing), and only four criticizing responses, as *“Suppea näkökulma”* (Narrow insight) and *“Epäsiistiä”* (Messy). There were also a few suggestions for revision, such as *“Kertaa artikkelisääntö!”* (Revise the article rules!) and *“Muista liikkuvan määreen paikka”* (Remember the location of the complements).

## **5 The congruencies and differences between teacher feedback in practice and theory**

As the collected data shows, the teacher perceptions of the given feedback are partly accurate and partly inexact, and altogether there are more congruencies than discrepancies between the teachers’ feedback giving theory and practice. The most significant conformities between Teacher A’s given feedback and her perceptions of it deal with the amount of feedback, the accuracy of error correction, the most essential issues of giving feedback and grading a writing and the tone of the

commentary. The congruencies between Teacher B's feedback giving theory and practice, on the contrary, include her conceptions of the amount of feedback and its focus on language and its forms. However, perceptions and practices do not meet in every issue: with Teacher A, these differences include matters of the sufficiency of the feedback and the amount of praise in it; with Teacher B the positive tone of the feedback, the equal distribution of feedback between different students, and the pervasiveness of the feedback do not show in the given feedback as intended.

The examination of student writings responded to by Teacher A shows that in all 12 compositions the errors have been marked with practically equal accuracy: very few errors, such as the spelling mistake in "noice", were left unresponded.

Additionally, all writers have received almost an equal amount of commentary on their writings. This is correspondent with Teacher A's aim of providing all writers evenhandedly with feedback, as well as with her perception of having dealt with all (found) errors in the texts. As her questionnaire answers state, she intends to provide the weakest writers with encouraging feedback, because she finds positive commentary important. Here, another correspondence can be seen between her thoughts and given feedback, as all student writings have been responded to with positive commentary which is either praise or a subtle suggestion of what could have been done differently.

The analysis of the student writing responses also shows that Teacher A follows her principles of what she finds essential in responding to texts and in grading them. She puts emphasis on the sincerity of the feedback and argues that it is important to tell the student what has been done well and to what attention should be paid, and this intention shows in her writing responses: all writings have received written commentary on their strengths or weaknesses. In addition, Teacher A finds texts' communicative functions, logic, originality, versatility of expression and correctness of language essential when grading them. This study does not aim to assess or grade any of the gathered student writings, but the

number of sample texts being this small it is easy to notice that in the highest ranked texts communicative and expressive means were used more skillfully than in the poorer ones. Thus, Teacher A's perception of valuing those issues in the grading process is congruent with the outcome.

There are also issues which appear unidentical in Teacher A's interview answers and the actual feedback given by her. She argues that in her commentary she tends to praise successful students, but the analysis of her commentary points out that the most successful writers actually have very little or no praise at all – instead, the threshold to express applause is considerably lower with weaker writers, who receive congratulations for issues which may have been left unresponded in better writers' texts. For instance, a composition with a relatively low grade has received positive commentary on its easy-to-understand structure and language, but compositions with a higher score lack this credit, even though their authors have succeeded even better in these issues.

According to Teacher B's questionnaire answers she does not believe she provides her students with sufficient feedback. The examination of her responses in student texts shows that she has it right: since most texts lack other than error-corrective commentary, the feedback is, in general, considerably insufficient. This may, however, result from lack of time and thus would not mean that it is the teacher's convention to give perpetually insufficient feedback. Although Teacher B reports striving for evenhanded distribution of feedback to her students, they do not receive it equally much: since writings with very few errors receive very few corrective responses and written commentary is given only sparingly, there are cases in which the only teacher-written feedback in student texts are two or three error corrections. Therefore we cannot say that feedback has been distributed equally, even though it has been the intention.

Teacher B also argues responding to student writings rather pervasively and not

necessarily emphasizing any certain aspect in her feedback. This is clearly not in accordance with her written commentary in student texts, as there are few comments and they are not comprehensive, but handle certain aspects of second language writing, such as content, structure, clarity and expression. On the other hand, because a major part of the feedback she gives consists of error corrections, it is unmistakable that more value is put on the correctness of language and versatility of expressions than on other language aspects. This notion does correspond with Teacher B's perception of being more thorough when responding to matters of language than when responding to matters of content. Finally, one more remarkable inconsistency is found between Teacher B's feedback giving practice and her perceptions of it: the amount of positive and encouraging commentary. Even though the teacher states that in all of her responses to student writings she aims to be encouraging and supportive, she actually provides all 24 compositions with only eight positive comments. Again, lack of time in the feedback giving process may have resulted in this difference, but clearly this is where teacher perceptions and actual feedback do not match.

## **6 Conclusion**

The present study has examined whether English teachers' perceptions of their own written feedback on student compositions correspond with the feedback they actually provide. Even though the sample group is relatively small, including only two teachers with 12 and 24 student writings, a few conclusions can be drawn after the analysis and comparison of the teacher's questionnaire form answers and the student texts with feedback. Firstly, the teachers believe they are not giving feedback sufficiently, mainly due to lack of time. This perception is clearly realistic, as one of the teachers involved does not really offer other feedback than error corrections. Furthermore, every writer knows that good feedback is never provided too much. Secondly, both teachers find positive feedback essential and

believe they are providing their students with well-deserved praise, encouraging support and motivating commentary. This perception does not prove to actualize, as one teacher chooses not to thumb up her successful writers and another has very few positive things to say. Thirdly, the teachers think they are giving pervasive and comprehensive feedback. One of them does, another does not: in some cases pervasive feedback means commentary on several different aspects of language and writing, in others it shows as a lack of comments focusing on certain language aspects.

The present study ratifies Lee's (2010: 15) finding of what issues teachers intend to respond to and what issues they actually do respond to. As Lee reports, teachers tend to give most feedback on language form and its accuracy although they know that good feedback does not stick to just form. Additionally, Lee points out that teachers tend to mark the errors comprehensively, even though selective marking is preferred. In the present study, however, teachers have the intention to respond to errors comprehensively, not selectively, and they also carry the feedback out this way. Both teachers in the present study also follow the Council of Europe's guideline (CEFR 2011: 205) and believe that positive tone is an essential part of good feedback.

What the present study does not pay attention to is the oral feedback, which is not recorded or analyzed at all. Both teachers in the study report that they find oral feedback important, even the most important part of the entire feedback giving process. It would be interesting to see how teachers' written and oral feedback giving practices compare to each other, and how teachers follow their principles when giving oral feedback. The study could also be repeated with a larger sample group and more teachers to interview. Dividing teacher markings in student writings into categories proved to be rather problematic in the present study, mainly due to the possibility of classifying one marking into several categories. This is what I find to be an interesting and challenging topic for a study in this

field: providing different systems of error and feedback categorization to help research the properties of language teachers' feedback outcome in student papers.

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