Iranian TOEFL/IELTS Teachers' Perception and Practice of Feedback in L2 Writing Classrooms

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to investigate the Iranian TOEFL/IELTS teachers' written feedback practices and their perception of written feedback in writing classes. The examination of the questionnaires given to 30 TOEFL/IELTS writing teachers and the analysis of their written feedbacks on 300 students' essays indicate that although the majority of the teachers believe that they should provide feedback on the language (i.e., spelling, grammar, vocabulary, capitalization, and punctuation), organization (i.e., cohesion, coherence, and unity), and content of students' essays, most of their written feedbacks are concerned with the language of their students' essays. In fact, a discrepancy was found between the teachers' perception and their practice in the provision of feedback. In addition, although the majority of the teachers believed that they should give indirect feedback on their students' writings, most of their written feedbacks were direct. This lack of harmony between the teachers' perception and their practice in providing written feedback calls for more attention.

1. Introduction

Finding effective ways to improve students' writing has long been many teachers' concern. As Weigle (2002) notes, "The ability to write effectively is becoming increasingly important in the global community, and writing instruction is assuming an increasing role in both second- and foreign-language education" (p.1). The difficulty of writing has its roots in the fact that ESL students should consider a number of factors such as grammar, vocabulary, coherence, cohesion, and content simultaneously; "The difficulty becomes even more pronounced if their language proficiency is weak" (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p.303). Hence, ESL teachers use different strategies to improve ESL students' writing. One such strategy is providing feedback on students' writing. As Leki (1990, p.66) notes, "student writers need and deserve responses to their writing". In addition, more fine-tuned analysis of this issue underscores the fact that the way teachers respond to their students' writing can have positive or damaging impact on their motivation and attitude towards writing.

2. Literature Review

Researchers agree that providing students with feedback plays a significant role in improving their writing (e.g. Chandler, 2003; Dempsey, PytlikZillig, & Bruning, 2009; Fazio, 2001; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998). However, whether error feedback helps L2 student to improve the accuracy and quality of their writing has been open to much controversy (Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1996; Truscott, 1999). Many studies have demonstrated that if students receive feedback from their teachers, their writing accuracy improves over time (Chandler, 2003; Fazio, 2001; Ferris, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001 .)

Studies on feedback to L2 students' written errors (Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009) have investigated whether certain types of corrective feedback are more likely to lead to L2 writing improvement. Such being the case, providing either direct or indirect feedback to help students achieve greater accuracy in a writing course has been an issue of much discussion. By definition, direct feedback refers to error detection and overt error correction by the teacher. According to Ferris (2003), the teacher can use a number of techniques such as substitution, insertion, deletion, or reformulation to give direct feedback to the student writer (see Figure 1).

Example 1: Deletion
This is not (the life they have imagined before they came.
Example 2: Insertion
                        to find   an
Immigrants should expect ^ true happiness in America because of ^ unbeatable economy, better education, and freedom.
Example 3: Substitution
                                                better
To them, this country is the place to seek a more appropriate future.
Example 4: Reformulation

Figure 1. Examples of direct feedback, adapted from Ferris (2003)

In contrast, by providing indirect feedback the teacher indicates that an error has been made but does not provide the proper form, "thereby leaving the student to diagnose and correct it" (Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005, p.193). In fact, indirect feedback is a very useful strategy to help students detect and correct their own errors .

In examining the effect of indirect feedback, a distinction is made between coded and uncoded feedback. According to Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005) coded feedback points to the exact location of an error, and the type of error involved is indicated with a code (e.g., PS means an error in the use or form of the past simple tense). Uncoded feedback refers to instances when the teacher underlines, circles, or places an error tally in the margin, but, in each case, leaves the student to diagnose and correct the error.

Table 1.
Analysis of Error Feedback Adapted from Lee (2007)

Error feedback strategy	Explanation	Example
Direct error feedback	Locate and correct errors	Has went gone
Uncoded error feedback	Locate errors	Has went
Coded error feedback	Locate errors and identify error types	Has went verb form
Indirect feedback (Indirect location of errors)	Indirectly locate errors	e.g., putting a mark in the margin to indicate an error on a specific line – e.g. Yesterday I witness a robbery on my way home from school. It was about 5 pm. I am walking along Chater Road when a car stopped right in front of me . . .
	Indirectly locate errors and identify error types	e.g., by writing "verb form" (or "v") in the margin to indicate a verb form error on a specific line – e.g. Yesterday I witness a robbery on my way home from school. It was about 5 p.m. I am walking along Chater Road when a car stopped right in front of me . . .

Table 1 presents some examples for different types of teacher's error feedback strategies commonly used in writing classes.

Another debated issue in L2 writing research is whether teacher's written feedback should focus on form, content, or both. In an attempt to dispel the ambiguity, Fathman and Whalley (1990) conducted a study in which four groups of students received no feedback, grammar feedback, content feedback, and grammar and content feedback respectively. The analysis of students' writing showed that the subsequent drafts of those who had received feedback only on content and those who were given feedback on both grammar and content improved more than those receiving feedback on only their grammar or no feedback at all.

In another study, Ashwell (2000) examined whether the content feedback followed by form feedback is superior to other ways of providing feedback from the perspective of the improvements it can bring about in students' writings. The results showed that formal accuracy and content quality of the group who received the mixed pattern of content and form feedback improved more than the other groups who received only content, form or no feedback .

The effect of feedback on student revision has also been the concern of many researchers. In one of the feedback studies, Ferris (1997 as cited in Ferris 2003) focused on the influence of teacher commentary on student revision, and found that when "positive" comments were excluded from the calculations, some 76% of the teacher's responses were taken up by the students in their revisions. Although this study demonstrated that students paid some attention to their teacher's feedback, it showed that students do not fully take into account their teacher's comments when revising their writings. In another study, Conrad and Goldstein (1999 as cited in Ferris 2003) found that although participants revised their subsequent writings in response to 36 out of 44 teacher comments, they repeated the same errors. Examined carefully, these studies show that teacher's feedback does not necessarily lead to students' comprehensive revision of their writings .

According to Ferris (2003), "the available research to date linking teacher feedback to L2 student revision (and/or to short- or long-term improvement of students' texts), suggests the following generalizations:

- L2 student writers attend to teacher feedback and frequently attempt to incorporate teacher suggestions in their revisions;
- Revisions made by students in response to feedback may range from surface-level to meaning-level changes, and this appears to

be largely attributable to the types of feedback they have received from their teachers;

- Students who receive content-based or meaning-related feedback appear to improve the content of their texts from one draft to the next and over time;
- Not all revisions made by students in response to teacher feedback are successful, and some may actually harm the overall quality of a student text;
- Students' success in making effective changes in their texts in response to teacher feedback may vary depending on the type of change. (p.30)

Another line of research on feedback, investigates the extent to which the teachers are aware of the types of feedback they give to their students. As Montgomery and Baker (2007) argue:

> though L2 writing teachers are aware of students' perceptions of written feedback and should try to give helpful feedback to their students, they may not be fully aware of how much feedback they give on local (i.e. spelling, grammar, and punctuation) and global (i.e. ideas, content, and organization) issues nor whether the type of feedback they feel they should give adheres to their beliefs about written feedback. (p.83)

> In spite of the fact that the type of written feedback and the way it should be provided have long been many researchers' concern (e.g. Ashwell 2000; Fatham & Whalley 1990; Fazio, 2001; Ferris, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001), studies examining feedback given by teachers in real life situations are rare. Zamel (1985) argues that the research on actual teacher feedback suggests that some teachers focus more on local issues (i.e., spelling, grammar, and punctuation) than on global issues (i.e. content and organization). This is supported by the findings of the study by Chapin and Terdal (1990) who found that 64% of teachers' feedbacks were on local issues; in fact, teachers' focus on the local issues encouraged students to focus on local issues in their revisions.

The role of teacher beliefs on the provision of feedback seems an equally important issue; in fact, in the only one such study Lee (2009) examined teachers' perception of feedback in relation to their practice. First, she analyzed teachers' written feedback on 174 texts collected from 26 teachers and then interviewed seven teachers. Then, she administered a questionnaire to 206 secondary teachers and had follow-up interviews with 19 of them. Surprisingly, she concluded that although teachers

believed that good writing depends not only on accuracy but also on development of ideas and organization, most of them provided feedback on grammatical errors, i.e. 94.1 percent on form, 3.8 percent on content, 0.4 percent on organization, and 1.7 percent on general aspects of students' writing. This finding corroborates the fact that there is a chasm between teachers' perceptions about written feedback and their actual performance of giving feedback. Therefore, whether teachers' perception and their practice of giving feedback are congruent or not needs to be investigated.

2.1. Purpose of the Study

Whether teachers are fully aware of how much feedback they give on local (i.e., spelling, grammar, and punctuation) and global (i.e., ideas, content, and organization) aspects of their students' writing is a less challenged issue in the literature of written feedback studies. Hence, the current study is designed to analyze the Iranian teachers' perception of written feedback and their actual performance. It tries to provide a better understanding of whether teachers' perception of giving feedback is in harmony with their actual performance in the TOEFL/IELTS writing classes by addressing the following research questions:

1. Which type of Iranian EFL students' errors receives more feedback from writing teachers ?
2. What are the Iranian TOEFL/IELTS teachers' perceptions of written feedback?
3. Does Iranian ELT teachers' practice in provision of feedback reflect their perception of feedback?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Thirty experienced Iranian TOEFL/IELTS teachers from different language institutes participated in this study. The students from whom sample essays with written feedbacks were collected were attending TOEFL/IELTS preparation courses in Tehran. The students wrote essays in their TOEFL/IELTS preparation classes, and one essay from every student was collected.

3.2. Instruments

Sample written feedbacks of the TOEFL/IELTS teachers were collected. In addition, a questionnaire was used to find out the Iranian TOEFL/IELTS teachers' perceptions of giving written feedback on the student writers' essays. For the first part of the questionnaire, the writing teachers were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed

with each statement. Then, their responses to each statement were compared with their practice in the provision of written feedback. For the second part of the questionnaire, 10 open-ended questions were used to elicit teachers' perceptions of corrective feedback in their writing classes.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

In the first phase of the study, TOEFL/IELTS teachers' samples of written feedback on their students' essays from different TOEFL/IELTS courses were collected. In the second phase, teachers' written feedbacks regarding the quantity of written feedback on local errors (i.e. spelling, grammar, and punctuation) and on global errors (i.e. content and organization) were examined. Then, the data were analyzed to find out the extent to which the teachers' feedbacks were comprehensive in terms of language, organization, and content. Finally, to examine teachers' conception of written feedback, they were asked to complete a questionnaire .

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Frequency of Feedback on Error Types

To analyze teacher feedback, frequency counts were totaled for every category of feedback (language, organization, and content) on every draft of the essay written by each student. Table 2 presents an example of how frequency counts of feedback were totaled for one teacher's instances of feedback.

Table 2.

Sample Frequency of Written Feedback Provided by a Teacher

Essay Number	Language	Organization	Content	Total Number of Feedbacks	Indirect Feedbacks	Direct Feedbacks
1	15	3	0	18	0	18
2	9	5	0	14	0	14
3	3	2	0	5	0	5
4	17	4	0	21	0	21
5	4	1	0	5	0	5
6	9	2	0	11	0	11
7	13	3	0	16	0	16
8	7	1	0	8	0	8
9	19	7	0	26	0	26
10	2	1	0	3	0	3
Total	98	29	0	127	0	127

To find which type of Iranian TOEFL/IELTS students' errors received more feedback from their teachers, 10 essays with written feedbacks from 30 teachers were collected. Hence, the total number of essays which were examined was 300. A total of 3542 feedbacks were identified, of which 3238 (91.42%) were feedbacks that addressed language (i.e., spelling, grammar, vocabulary, capitalization, and punctuation), 260 (7.34%) were feedbacks that focused on organization (i.e., cohesion, coherence, and unity), and 44 (1.24%) were feedbacks on the content of students' essays. Table 3 presents the percentage and number of feedback types given to the students' errors.

Table 3.
Teachers' Written Feedback Focus

	Percentage and number of feedback types
Language	91.42% (3238)
Organization	7.34% (260)
Content	1.24% (44)
Total	100% (3542)

The findings reveal that Iranian TOEFL/IELTS teachers were concerned with the grammatical accuracy and mechanical errors which comprised spelling, punctuation, and capitalization mistakes. The teachers paid less attention to the organization of students' writings and the content of their essays. Almost the same findings were reported by Lee (2007) who stated that although the teachers in her study argued that there is more to good writing than accuracy, they paid more attention to language form. The results of her study showed that of the 5,353 feedback points identified, teachers inordinately gave feedback to the language form of their students' essays, "with 94.1 percent of the teacher feedback addressing form (3.8 per cent on content, 0.4 percent on organizational issues, and 1.7 percent on other aspects such as general comments on student writing)" (p.186).

Moreover, research examining actual teacher feedback has indicated that some teachers pay more attention to local issues such as grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and mechanics than to global issues such as cohesion, coherence, unity, and content (Ferris, 2006). In fact, such practice may lead students to focus more on local issues. As a case in point, Chapin and Terdal (1990) found that 64% of teachers' comments were on local issues which encourage students to focus more

on local issues in their revisions and pay less attention to the organization and content of their writings in their revisions.

4.2. TOEFL/IELTS Teachers' Perception of Written Feedback

To analyze Iranian TOEFL/IELTS teachers' perceptions of written feedback, the data collected from 30 teacher questionnaires were analyzed. In what follows, teachers' perceptions of feedback provision in EFL classrooms are described.

4.2.1. The Necessity of Giving Written Feedback

The teacher questionnaire data show that 100% of the teachers were of the opinion that teachers should give feedback to their students. They stated that giving feedback can provide learners with an opportunity to recognize their errors and mistakes and avoid making such errors in their future writings .

4.2.2. Selectivity vs. Comprehensiveness of Written Feedback

Similar to the results reported in Lee (2004), in the present study 76.66% of the teachers believed that teachers should mark students' errors comprehensively while the rest (23.33 %) noted that they had better do so selectively. Among the open-ended responses, one teacher stated her students' inability to identify and correct their own errors as the main reason behind providing comprehensive feedback on their writings. It can be noted that this common practice by the writing teachers as Lee (2004) notes may be because either their students liked it or they felt it was their responsibility to point out errors.

4.2.3. Written Feedback on Organization and Content

Twenty nine of the teachers (96.66%) believed that writing teachers should also give feedback to the organization (i.e., coherence, cohesion, and unity) of their students' essays. In fact, they believed that the purpose of essay writing is to help students learn how to write organized essays. At the same time, 23 (76.66%) of the teachers held that teachers should also provide feedback on the content of students' writings. Regarding the focus of the feedback, the present findings are consistent with those of Lee (2009) who reported that teachers in her study believed that in addition to the accuracy, content and organization of students' writings should be noticed.

4.2.4. Teachers' Perceptions of Their Error Correction Strategy Types

The questionnaire analysis shows that 23 of the teachers (76.66%) believed that writing instructors should give indirect feedback to their students' writings. Five (16.66%) favored direct feedback, and 2 (6.66%) did not have priorities regarding direct or indirect feedback .

In the open-ended responses, several teachers stated that provision of indirect feedback enables students to think more about their errors and produce correct forms. They argued that it can better improve their writing ability in the long run and suggested that teachers had better use direct feedback for elementary learners and indirect feedback for advanced students. One teacher stated that the type of feedback she provided depended on her judgment of the students' ability to provide correct forms. Teachers' perception of error correction strategies is shown in Table 4.

Table 4.
Teachers' Perceptions of their Error Correction Strategies

	Percentage and number of teachers
Direct error feedback	16.66% (5)
Indirect error feedback	76.66% (23)
No idea	6.66% (2)
Total	100% (30)
Coded error feedback	53.33% (16)
Uncoded error feedback	3.33% (1)
No idea	43.33% (13)
Total	100% (23)
Oral feedback (conferencing)	16.66% (5)
Written feedback	43.33% (13)
Both of them	40% (12)
Total	100% (30)

Sixteen of the teachers (53.33%) favored coded feedback, only 1 (3.33%) suggested that teachers should provide their students with uncoded feedback and 13 (43.33%) did not have any priority regarding coded or uncoded feedback. Although in the open-ended responses some teachers stated that using codes encourages students to discover their own mistakes, produce correct forms, and avoid some common writing problems, the analysis of the feedbacks they provided on the students' writing indicated that coding of errors is not a very popular practice. This may stem from two reasons. First, perhaps a uniform and clear set of codes were not taught to the students. Hence, teachers cannot expect their students to understand the meaning behind every code. Second, as Ferris (2003) notes, since the use of marking codes requires students to comprehend the codes and correct their own mistakes, it will not be effective unless the students possess sufficient metalinguistic knowledge to process the codes .

Thirteen of the teachers (43.33%) favored written feedback, 5 (16.66%) preferred conferencing, and 12 (40%) suggested the use of both techniques in writing classes. In the open-ended responses, one teacher stated that whether he gives oral or written feedback on students' writing depends on the type of error. For another, teacher time was a crucial factor, and when available, conferencing was regarded superior to written feedback.

4.3. Written Feedback and Teachers' Practice

TOEFL/IELTS teachers' written feedback practice was compared with their perception of written feedback in terms of comprehensiveness, types of feedback, and directness. What follows is a brief report of a comparison between teachers' perceptions of the written feedback and their practice in their classes.

4.3.1. Selectivity vs. Comprehensiveness of Written Feedback

Regarding selectivity or comprehensiveness of error feedback, teachers' beliefs and practice were congruent. In fact, those who believed that teachers should give selective written feedback to their students' essays provided error feedback selectively. Similarly, those who believed that teachers should give comprehensive written feedback to their students' essays indicated they gave a remarkable number of comprehensive feedbacks to their students' essays.

4.3.2. Written Feedback on Organization and Content

The analysis of the 3542 feedback types shows that teachers focused on language form in their response to student writing. In fact, 3238 of teachers' feedbacks (91.42%) were on language (i.e. spelling, grammar, vocabulary, capitalization, and punctuation), 260 (7.34%) on organization (i.e., cohesion, coherence, and unity), and 44 (1.24%) on the content of students' essays (see Figure 2). This indicates that Iranian TOEFL/IELTS teachers' feedback on the organization and content of their students' essays is not adequate. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a mismatch between teachers' perceptions and their practice.
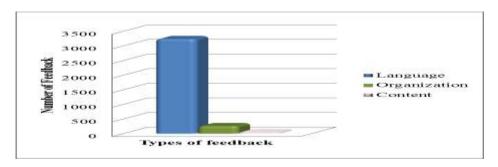
Figure 2. The number of feedbacks teachers gave to the language, organization, and content of students' essays

Figure 3 shows the feedback types given to the students' essays. As seen, most of the teacher feedback was given to language errors. This language-focused written feedback practice is also reported by Montgomery and Baker (2007) who found that teachers generally gave a substantial amount of local feedback and relatively little global feedback on students' writings. They noted that the organization and content of students' writings did not receive adequate feedback from teachers. As they noted, the emphasis on local errors of grammar and mechanics on all drafts may encourage students to prioritize local errors. Therefore, although teachers attempt to teach their students to write well-organized essays with rich content, they may "unknowingly be strengthening the very belief" (p. 95) that everything centers around language by providing feedback only on the language of students essays.
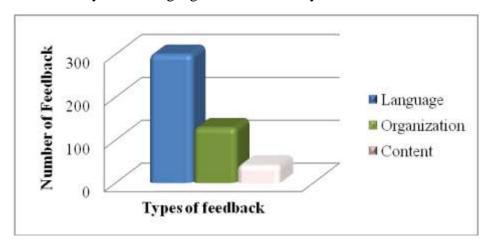

Figure 3. Feedbacks teachers gave to the language, organization, and content of students' essays

4.3.3. Direct vs. Indirect Feedback

More fine-tuned analysis of teachers' written feedback shows a mismatch in teachers' perception and practice in the provision of direct and indirect feedback. Although the majority of teachers noted that they should provide indirect feedback to students' writings, in practice only 167 (4.71%) of the feedbacks were given indirectly (see Figure 4). Feedback analysis shows that almost all teachers tend to provide direct feedback to their students' essays. This implies that teachers' error feedback practices are not congruent with their beliefs.
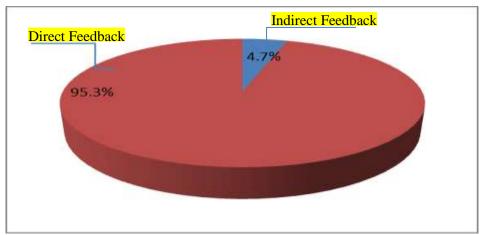

Figure 4. The percentage of direct and indirect feedback given by teachers

The practice of giving direct feedback observed in this study reflects the findings reported by Lee (2004) and Lee (2009): "teachers' error feedback is not congruent with their beliefs." (p.16). Similar to the present study, most of the teachers' feedbacks in Lee's study were direct. In fact, most of the teachers in Lee's study did not provide indirect feedback on their students' essays and, therefore, could not involve their students in problem-solving tasks that required higher-order thinking .

4.3.4. Coded vs. Uncoded Feedback

As discussed in the previous section, Iranian TOEFL/IELTS teachers rarely provided indirect feedback on students' writing. Consequently, the number of coded and uncoded feedbacks was expected to be few. The analysis of teacher feedback revealed that none of these teachers' written feedback was coded. There is a mismatch between teachers' perception and practice regarding providing coded and uncoded feedback .

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The conclusion that can be drawn from the present study is that IELTS and TOEFL writing teachers' perceptions of giving feedback are not reflected in their practice in providing written feedback. Although they believe that teachers should give feedback on the language, organization, and content of their students' essays, most of them provide feedback on the language of their students' writings. In addition, most of their feedbacks were direct and uncoded. This suggests that L2 writing teachers should pay more attention to their real practice in providing feedback on students' writing in the classrooms. It is hoped that this study can encourage teachers' self-assessment of their written feedback practice and their awareness of the underlying reasons for such a practice. Examination of whether teachers' awareness of their written-feedback practices can change the way they provide feedback in their L2 writing classes remains to be researched in future studies .

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Appendix
Teacher Questionnaire
Part 1
Choose the answer that best describes what you think.
Strongly Agree Agree No Idea Disagree Strongly Disagree
1. It is necessary to give corrective feedback to students' writings.
2. Teachers had better give feedback to all students' errors.
3. Teachers had better give feedback to students' writings selectively.
4. Teachers must give feedback to the organization of students' writings.
5. Teachers must give feedback to the content of students' writing
6. It is only the teachers' responsibility to correct students' errors.
7. Teachers had better give direct feedback (e.g.He go/went yesterday.) to students' writings.
8. Teachers had better give indirect and coded feedback (e.g. He go/verb tense yesterday.) to students' writings.
9. Teachers had better give indirect and uncoded feedback (e.g. He go yesterday.) to students' writing.
10. Teachers had better use different corrective feedback strategies based on the type of errors.
11. I personally prefer conferencing (oral feedback) to written feedback.
12. I believe that my corrective feedback strategies are useful for my students.
Part 2
1.   Is it necessary to give corrective feedback to the TOEFL/IELTS students' writings? Why?
   ----
2.   What types of errors you usually give more feedback to?
   ----
3.   Do you usually correct all students' errors or correct some of them?
   ----
4.   Giving feedback must be written or oral?
   ----
5.   Do you expect your students to read your feedbacks and take them into consideration in the future?
   ----
6.   Do you think giving feedback must be direct (e.g. He go/went yesterday.) or indirect (e.g. He go/verb tense yesterday.)?
   ----
7.   Do you think our indirect feedback must be coded (e.g. He go/verb tense yesterday.) or uncoded (e.g. He go yesterday.)?
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8.   Do you believe that teachers must give feedback to the organization (e.g. cohesion, coherence, and unity) of students' writings?
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9.   Is it necessary to give feedback to the content of students' writings?
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10.   How do you evaluate the way you give feedback to students' writings?
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