

## Students' and tutors' perceptions of feedback on academic essays in an open and distance learning context

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### Abstract

Feedback is the most important aspect of the learning and teaching process. Through feedback, tutors/lecturers provide an important intervention in teaching as students would always like to know where they did right or wrong in their written assessed work. Without feedback, learning is not complete. This article reports on the results of a major study on academic writing of first year English Second Language university students in open and distance learning context. The study probed both students' perceptions and tutors' practices in the provision of giving feedback. Marked students' assignments were evaluated using document analysis method and interviews were held with students and tutors. The findings show that feedback provided to students is not always sufficient and therefore denying students' opportunities to learn effectively as they would not know their weak and strong points.

**Keywords:** Open and distance learning; English for Academic Purposes; feedback; talkback; feeding forward; tutor-markers

### Introduction

Feedback is very critical in learning and teaching. Without feedback, learning is like a ship without radar as there is no direction given to students regarding their written work. This study was qualitative in nature. In this study, data were collected using marked students essays by *English for Academic Purposes* students, as well as interviews with tutor-markers in an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution. The study found that marking of students' assignments was not satisfactory and students did not benefit much from feedback. Amongst others, the article recommends a rigorous training of tutor-markers to ensure that they strengthen the weak link that exists in providing effective feedback to students in order to enhance learning and the teaching of writing. The article also recommends training of both staff and students to produce effective feedback and adequately respond to feedback, respectively.

### Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Academic writing is one of the most critical skills at university because most assessment tasks require a demonstration of learning through writing. As Lea and Street (1998) argue, one of the underlying assumptions of an Academic Literacies (AL) model is that educators need to be concerned with literacies more generally across academic contexts and focus not only on the assessed texts produced by students, such as the papers students submit for grades or examinations they take.

Several researchers suggest the use of effective feedback in academic writing pedagogy (Granville & Dison, 2009; Ferris, 2008; Li, 2007; Spencer, 2007; Weaver, 2006; Zhu, 2004; Cabral & Tavares, 2002; Saito, 1994). For instance, Weaver (2006) and Ferris (2008) concur that students should be shown their strengths and weaknesses so that they can improve on their future work. Weaver (2006) further states that some academics think feedback does not work as students are only concerned about the grade they receive from their assignments. She found that students were motivated to

improve when they received constructive feedback and also suggests that tutors should provide appropriate guidance and motivation rather than diagnosing problems and justifying the marks. Similarly, Saito (1994) suggests that English Second Language (ESL) teachers need to make explicit the purposes of their feedback so that students can know how to handle that feedback and use it to their benefit. Furthermore, Spencer (2007) suggests the following solutions to teaching and responding to academic writing, namely, teacher education where teachers are trained to effectively respond to student writing; adequate exchange of information by writers (students) and readers (lecturers/tutors); and that teachers should also be writers and teach writing as a process. However, Lea and Street (1998) found that tutors often gave vague comments which students were not able to understand and use effectively. The researchers above indicate the value of feedback in student writing. The article argues that feedback is one of the key cornerstones of sound pedagogy.

Time is the most critical factor in giving quality feedback to students. Bailey (2009, p. 1) indicates two challenges that tutors have regarding feedback, namely, less time to write comments on students' work and fewer opportunities for tutorial interaction. The researcher concurs with Bailey's observation as that resonates with what occurs at ODL institutions, particularly with the semesterisation and modularisation of courses. Boud and Molloy (2013) also attribute poor quality of feedback on semesterisation and modularisation. Bailey's (2009) study found that students value feedback and need explicit language free of jargon for them to understand feedback clearly. In a nutshell, feedback should be unambiguous and make sense to students.

Some tutor feedback on student writing tends to focus mainly on the mechanical aspects of language and even students expect feedback to point out grammar aspects. Saito (1994) found that ESL students found teacher feedback satisfactory when it focused on grammatical errors. He indicates that many ESL students feel that they need more help with grammar and also thinks that the teachers' responsibility is to model these aspects of English. He further argues that feedback that gives clues is more effective in helping students to revise than that (feedback) which is corrected (*ibid*). Similarly, Curry (2006) found that feedback on student writing focused on correcting surface features of language. Again, Radecki and Swales (1988) noted that learners expect error correction from their teachers and if they (learners) do not get that, they (teachers) may lose their credibility. In the same way, Fregeau (1999, p. 7) found that "surface structure correction was the most common type of correction used as an approach to teaching writing skills and language structure" and reports that it was not effective. She further reports that students felt that the types of responses they got were hypocritical and ineffective in improving their writing (*ibid*). Furthermore, Jackson, Meyer and Parkinson (2006) note that grammatical accuracy influences students' marks to a lesser extent, and tone and style only marginally, and that feedback on student writing is largely in the form of brief written comments, with corrections of grammar also being common. However, Dowden, Pittaway, Yost and McCarthy (2013) report that students are sometimes irritated by feedback on grammar. So, most feedback to student writing puts more emphasis to aspects of grammar, while content which matter most takes the back seat. Although highlighting of grammatical errors is important in ESL contexts, it should not be the sole focus of feedback.

A talkback approach is suggested as a better way of communicating with students regarding their writing. Lillis (2006) suggests the shift from "feedback" to "talkback" in responding to student writing because talkback is considered to be student-centred. She critiques feedback as concentrating on student written texts as a product and a tendency towards closed commentary with evaluative language (good; weak). Furthermore, Lillis (2001) argues that talkback provides student writers with the opportunity to respond to, and to question, tutor comments as well as articulate their criticism of dominant conventions. She contends that talkback focuses on the students' texts as a process, an acknowledgement of the partial nature of any text, an attempt to open up space where the

student writer can say what she likes and does not like about what she is expected to make meaning within (Lillis 2006).

Bharuthram and McKenna (2006) share the same view. Talkback appears to be a very interactive way of giving feedback where learners are engaged and asked deeper questions regarding their written work as opposed to just giving evaluative comments.

Most students are more interested in the grade they receive from the assignment than carefully reading tutor comments (Weaver, 2006; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001). However, that should not imply that feedback is not important. Just like Weaver (2006), Higgins *et al.* (2001) concur that tutors argue that students do not take feedback comments seriously, that they only care about the grade and that the only time they read the comments is when that feedback concerns correct exam answers. Comparatively, these researchers associate giving feedback to the communication process which involves “the linear transfer of information from the sender (tutor) to the recipient (student) via a media (usually written comments)” (Higgins *et al.* 2001, p. 271). Similar to Lea and Street (1998), Higgins *et al.* (2001, p. 272) further contend that “tutors assume a position of authority within a power relationship based on their experience and institutional context”, where the tutor occupies the dual role of both assisting and passing judgement on the student. In addition, Higgins *et al.* (2001) suggest that there should be more open discussion, collaboration and negotiation between tutors in order to reflect on, question, make explicit and share competing understandings. Like Lillis (2003), Higgins *et al.* (2001) further suggest that feedback needs to be more dialogical and ongoing, which means that discussion, clarification and negotiation between students and tutors can equip students with a better appreciation of what is expected of them in the process of writing. In contrast to Lillis' (2006) talkback approach, they suggest a feeding forward approach instead of a feedback approach (Higgins *et al.* 2001). Similarly, Boughey (1997) reports that she uses questions as part of feedback to prompt students to reflect upon what they had written so that they develop their awareness of the need to be explicit in writing and to consider the possibility of the existence of viewpoints other than their own. Dowden *et al.* (2013) also report that “feedforward” enhanced the efficacy of written feedback. Both feedforward and talkback are very critical in providing feedback to students. These strategies could improve students' conceptions of feedback and help them develop critical thinking skills and academic literacies, which they can apply in future writing tasks.

Blair and McGinty (2013, p. 466) define feedback dialogue as a collaborative discussion about feedback (between lecturer and student or student and student) “which enables shared understandings and subsequently provides opportunities for further development based on exchange”. Furthermore, these researchers reveal that students find feedback difficult to understand because they do not understand the expert language of the discipline. They concur with researchers above that students struggle to comprehend feedback because they do not have the pedagogic or assessment literacy needed. In addition, Blair and McGinty (2013) found that students wanted a one-to-one consultation with the tutor regarding feedback. One-to-one consultation applies in residential universities, where tutors can meet face-to-face with their students. It is considered by the researcher that consultation in this form is very difficult to apply in an ODL context. This is often the case, as lecturers who are the primary producers of feedback do not have the capability to physically meet with off-campus students.

Blair and McGinty (2013) also recommend the training of students to understand feedback and argue that students should be engaged in a dialogue for them to effectively utilise feedback. Moreover, these researchers recommend deeper dialogue for students to take ownership and responsibility for learning and feedback negotiation where a discussion on feedback takes place. The practice of giving feedback cannot be based on belief but should be informed by theory.

It seems like students are mostly unhappy about the feedback they receive from lecturers. Dowden *et al.* (2013) indicate that students are generally dissatisfied with feedback as the quality thereof is not proportional to the amount of money they pay for university education as well as the disjuncture between feedback and the learning outcomes. Furthermore, these authors also argue that many undergraduate students do not have the pedagogic or assessment literacy to dissect and understand feedback. In addition, they point out that emotion is underestimated when giving feedback. Poulos and Mahony (2008, cited in Dowden *et al.*, 2013) report that students prefer feedback to be specific and timely, and this facilitates a smooth transition of first year students into university. Similar to Blair and McGinty (2013), Dowden *et al.* (2013) also found that students would like to have contact with the marker regarding additional clarification on the feedback provided. Moreover, Dowden *et al.* (2013) argue that feedback is mediated by emotion, and the degree of support in learning and teaching also influences students' perceptions. Their findings indicate that many students were not assessment literate and that contributes in them not using the feedback provided more efficiently. Moreover, these scholars suggest that students should be taught how to respond to written feedback. They also highlight that most teaching staff members do not have teaching qualifications and that may also contribute in the absence of provision of quality feedback to students, as they were not trained to do so. A lack of academic staff qualified specifically in teaching is likely to prove true for ODL institutions in general. The implication of staff unqualified in actual teaching supports the assumption that teaching staff also lack training around assessment practices for learning. However, ODL institutions are attending to the development of teaching staff by providing in-service training on assessment. For example, the ODL institution in which this study was conducted offers professional assessment training to academics.

Pedagogic practices like assessment cannot be done on a theoretical vacuum, as theory should inform these teaching practices. Boud and Molloy (2013) argue that the practice of giving feedback in higher education is not influenced by research or theory. One of the suggested approaches to feedback, identified by Boud and Molloy (2013), is the "feedback sandwich" where negative feedback is sandwiched by two sides of positive feedback. For example, one tutor gave the following sandwich feedback:

*"You have submitted a thoroughly researched piece of academic work. Your argument is sound and you have used recent literature to support your claims. However, your work lacks a coherent structure, as your ideas are not presented well. I suggest you always use a topic sentence together with your supporting sentences in your paragraphs to address this. Otherwise, your hard work and rigour is evident in your writing and keep it up."* (Feedback by tutor)

Boyd and Molloy (2013) argue that feedback should be the fundamental part of curriculum design and not just an episodic mechanism delivered by teachers to learners. These scholars also indicate that factors -such as modularisation and semesterisation of courses- have brought with them less assessment and feedback opportunities. They indicate that, historically, feedback used to be a one-way communication from the teacher to the students, where the latter did not have any active part to play. This can also be attributed to teacher-centred approach, which predominated the education landscape for decades. The fact that there is a paradigm shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approach also implies that the way feedback is written and given to students should also change. They contend that, if there is no discernable effect, the feedback has not occurred and that feedforward is not a separate notion but a necessary characteristic of feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Similarly, they also advocate the training of students to assimilate feedback so that they can be assessment literate. They also point out that, in providing effective feedback, teachers might be preoccupied with the notion that they should not spoon-feed students and this has also denied students to receive an enriching feedback from them (Boyd & Molloy, 2013). These

researchers also suggest that, if the active role of learners could be acknowledged, then feedback conception should move from being mechanistic to being responsive. Furthermore, they indicate that “underpreparedness is one of the factors contributing to incomprehensibility of feedback by students” (Boud & Molloy, 2013, p. 705). These scholars argue that students should play an active role for them to be able to use feedback effectively. They also advocate that feedback should be embedded within the curriculum. They argue that the learner-centred approach does not necessarily render the teacher redundant in feedback but repositions the teacher to new sets of responsibilities by assuming the facilitator role.

Price, Handley, Millar and O'Donovan (2010) argue that much staff time and effort go into the production of feedback, while little is being done to measure the impact of feedback. Price *et al.* (2010) also concur that assessment literacy is key to evaluation of feedback and feedback processes. Furthermore, these scholars report that the corrective mode of feedback was encouraged by Behaviourism. Similarly, they argue that assessment literacy is important for students to use feedback more effectively. They also report students' dissatisfaction with feedback in terms of illegible hand writing, negative tone, ambiguous feedback, incomprehensible feedback, less time spend on feedback, inappropriate feedback, clarity and applicability of feedback, as some of the themes emerging from their study. In contrast, staff are reported as having the belief that their feedback is effective and providing guided feedback. Price *et al.* (2010) report that students need more than justification of the grade in feedback. They also argue that teachers do not want to change the way they provide feedback, despite students being dissatisfied with the feedback.

Saddler (2010) also concurs that students do not have the assessment literacy to understand and effectively use feedback. He contends that there is uncertainty regarding the impact of feedback.

Research reveals that students would like their teachers to attend to mechanical errors and that academic literacies indeed involves deeper writing issues than just surface grammar errors. As discussed above, feedback to student writing is an important pedagogical practice in higher education, particularly in ESL contexts. Nothing is more valuable to ESL students than being shown the strengths and weaknesses pertaining to their writing. Therefore, teaching through feedback is one of the precious opportunities AL practitioners may use to effectively acculturate these learners into their discourse communities.

## Research Method and Design

The study was qualitative in nature and used the case study as design. The case study approach was used because a particular case -ESL students' perceptions of feedback- was investigated to find out how they perceive the quality of feedback they receive on their written work. The sample comprised tutors who mark assignments and exams for the *English for Academic Purposes* module, and the students. A total of eight English tutor-markers participated in the study. All eight tutors who mark for this module were willing to participate in this study after an invitation was extended to them. All ethical issues were observed including anonymity (pseudonyms were used instead of real names), confidentiality and the right to stop participating in the study amongst others. A questionnaire, focus group interviews and marked student assignments were the data collection instruments used in this study. A questionnaire was administered to both students (appendix 1) and tutors (appendix 2) and was subsequently followed by interviews and content analysis of marked assignments. The rationale behind the use of a combination of these data collection methods (triangulation) was to get rich and in-depth data regarding students' and tutors views on feedback (Bell, 2005).

This was also done to replicate the methods used by theorists of the academic literacies approach, which is the theoretical framework underpinning this study (Lea, 2008; Lea & Street, 1998). As

Lea (2008) states, “the academic literacies approach generally uses qualitative and ethnographic methods to obtain data. Accordingly, interviews, students’ writing samples and feedback on students’ writing were identified as the common methodological approaches used in academic literacies research” (p. 232). However, in this study questionnaires were also used as a data collection instrument, and the study adopted a case study instead of ethnography.

Although interviews are considered to be a common data collection instrument in qualitative research, they were complemented by an open-ended questionnaire and marked students’ essays, which provided rich reliable data. The study used focus group interviews, which probed students’ perceptions and experiences about feedback to student writing to supplement and confirm the questionnaire data in order to increase the reliability of the data. The purpose of the interviews in this study was to gain insight into English first year university students’ and tutors’ perceptions and experiences regarding feedback to student writing, as well as to confirm questionnaire data (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002).

Documents in research may include, *inter alia*: policies, acts and written essays. In addition, the material may also be public records, textbooks, letters, films, tapes diaries, themes and reports (Neuman, 2006). In this study, it was important to look at student essay assignments in order to confirm the data from both student and tutor questionnaires. Content analysis -which is defined as a technique for gathering, analysing and interpreting the content of text- was used to analyse marked assignments (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2002; Neuman, 2006). In addition, content or documents analysis focuses on analysing or interpreting recorded material to learn about human behaviour. Therefore, the documents in this study were students’ marked assignments. The analysis focused on students’ writing, and tutor feedback on students’ writing were explored in addition to administering questionnaires and conducting interviews in order to adhere to the academic literacies theory. This data collection strategy was also employed to validate both student and tutor responses to confirm or corroborate information from other instruments (the questionnaire and focus group interviews). Content analysis was also adopted in this study to answer the sub-question: How do tutors respond and give feedback to first year students’ academic writing?

Fifteen (15) scripts were randomly selected and analysed, but only nine were selected to report on as data reached a point of saturation (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Data analysis in this study involved three steps suggested by Vithal and Jansen (2005) and (Neuman, 2006), namely: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Basically, data analysis and interpretation followed the grounded theory framework. The researcher primarily used immersion strategies, that is, “reliance on the researcher’s intuitive and interpretive capacities” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 106). Therefore, the study looked for patterns in relationships and the researcher created new concepts by blending together empirical evidence and abstract concepts. The researcher categorised data into codes and thereafter identified patterns and relationships between the three sets of data from the questionnaires, focus group interviews and student’s essays.

In data analysis, the goal was to organise specific details into a coherent picture, model or set of interlocked concepts (Neuman, 2006). Responses from each question were grouped together. An analysis was undertaken and codes were assigned to the data and themes and categories began to emerge. However, only selected representative quotations were recorded and reported on this study.

## Findings and discussion

This section presents the results of the study. The results are presented by first highlighting the question asked and the responses to that question, followed by an analysis and interpretation.

### **Students' responses on feedback**

Some participants indicated that they value feedback and it helps them avoid repeating the mistakes in future writing tasks. For instance, Jim indicated that: *"I feel good because I will know the way forward after that"* and Mary noted that: *"They help improve your mistakes."* Similarly, Sarah commented that: *"During tutorials a tutor must ask students to write an essay and mark them in class to correct and show us our mistakes before we submit our essays to de<sup>1</sup> lecturer"*.

However, some students were not happy with their feedback due to the effort they put in the task, particularly when they did research and yet received a lower grade. Some put it like this: *"I am so pleased but at some extent I feel that I deserved more than the mark I got"* (Calvin). Debora indicated that: *"Some of the feedback are not good when you give us"*. Samantha said she is *"not happy because they (tutors) are not satisfied even though I spend a lot of time researching and finding information on the topic"*, while David said: *"To be honest there was not much feedback because I got a high mark"*. These findings corroborate with studies by Dowden *et al.* (2013) and Price *et al.* (2010).

Participants found that they did not receive good feedback from their tutors regarding their writing. One student lamented that: *"They are not as clear as to what I was supposed to write or where I was wrong"* (Mosima) while another one said that *"this time around not useful because of illegible hand writing"*.

These comments indicate poor use of feedback and participants did not benefit anything from the comments; it resonates with Krause's (2001) findings. As a result, tutors missed a good opportunity of communicating with students and learning. This practice on giving feedback should be discouraged by all means.

However, some found that the feedback is *"very useful because they pin point all the mistakes, so I get a clear understanding of what I should do next time on my essay assignments"* (Lerato). Furthermore, another one said: *"I like knowing what the lecturer/ tutor thought about my essay and what they found exciting and not so exciting, the feedback is of great importance, I learn a lot from them"* (Tlou).

Seemingly, some markers gave useful comments while others did not give any helpful comments. The fact that some students indicated that feedback was useful refutes assertions that students do not value feedback, as alluded by Higgins *et al.* (2001). Students yearn for teaching from ESL practitioners through quality feedback and if we are not doing that, we are failing them.

Feedback is very important, more especially in the ODL context, as it is one of the few interactions that tutors or markers have with students. Therefore, the quality of feedback that students receive from ESL practitioners cannot be underestimated. Interestingly, an analysis of marked assignments data also revealed that students who got high marks did not receive any feedback comments except *"excellent"*. Some students need to know how they got that mark and the good things they did, so that they will carry on doing that way in their future writing tasks (Weaver, 2006). Some respondents thought that the feedback they received was very useful. These students were keen to know where they went wrong in their essays. One student complained of illegible handwriting and could not benefit from the comments.

The students felt error correction is important when marking. Some felt that lecturers/markers should focus on spelling. However, some students felt that grammar should not be considered when marking; hence suggesting that only content is sufficient.

Unsurprisingly, some students expect marking to focus on error correction. For instance, Tom commented that tutors should focus *"on understanding of how I wrote on that paper and focus on correcting my mistakes"* while David said: *"They assist you a lot you turn not to repeat what was*

*detected as wrong*". Similarly, Nancy said: *"It helps to identify the mistake I made and do some corrections according to the markers comments"*.

Two students indicated that markers should focus more on content than on language, and this is a very rare demand from ESL students. This comment resonates with a number of researchers advocating the move away from concentrating too much on grammar to content related feedback (Curry, 2006; Fregeau, 1999; Saito, 1994; Harris, 1977). One participant said that marking should focus on *"the points/idea and not much of the framework (grammar/language)"* (Jim) while another said marking should focus on *"other things except spelling"* (Karabo).

One student requested for empathy from the markers by stating that: *"When marking our assignments, please do not look down on us. Place yourself in our position and try to think like we do. A student's perception on a certain topic will not always be the same as those of the lecturer's"* (Thandi). This resonates with Dowden *et al.* (2013), who argue that the issue of emotion is often ignored while providing feedback.

Students clearly indicate that grammar -spelling in particular- is a great challenge to them (Lloyd, 2007). They would like to have all their mistakes highlighted so that they will be able to correct them (Radecki & Swales, 1988). Notably, this shows that they need comprehensive feedback that addresses all their weaknesses and strengths. Some also feel they also need to be commended when they do well. In other words, they need markers to also give positive comments instead of being negative all the time. Therefore, they need motivation in this regard. Boud and Molloy (2013) mentioned that "sandwich" approach when providing feedback.

These responses indicate that students would like to learn from their mistakes where their writing weaknesses are brought to the surface by markers, so that they would not repeat the same errors. This implies that tutor-markers need to teach through giving feedback, and this is crucial in ODL, where students get only one of the rare opportunities of having communication from the teaching team regarding their writing. On the whole, data from students indicate that these ESL students are not provided with good feedback to enhance their learning.

### ***Tutors' responses on giving feedback***

While writing feedback, one tutor made the following comments:

*"PLEASE NOTE THAT TASKS 2&3 WAS SUPPOSED TO BE SUBMITTED AS TWO SEPARATE TASKS. PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOU FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY IN FUTURE. WHILST YOU HAVE RAISED SOME VALID AND INTERESTING VIEWS YOU HAVE NOT MANAGED TO ORGANISE YOUR ARGUMENT IN A LOGICAL AND COHESIVE MANNER. YOU ALSO NEED TO PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO YOUR WORD ORDER AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE. MAKE USE OF A DICTIONARY TO VERIFY YOUR SPELLING AND VOCABULARY"* (Feedback by tutor)

In this assignment, the marker circled all language errors -for example, spelling and vocabulary. Language errors were mostly highlighted, as literature has confirmed that most feedback comments focus on grammar aspects. The student was advised to define different types of euthanasia. Though this marker is pointing out issues that the student needs to work on, the use of capital letters is not setting a good example to students, as they may adopt this style of writing in their future writing tasks. Accordingly, the marker is advising the student to use a dictionary to fix spelling errors and for improving vocabulary. This could attest to the fact that students delay writing assignments to the last minute to an extent that they submit poor quality work (Ellis, Taylor & Drury, 2005; Gambell, 1991).

When giving feedback, tutors indicated that they make feedback as comprehensive as possible in order to make the students aware of what they did right and where they need to improve. For example, one tutor said: *"For those who perform badly, I comment on every item e.g. content,*

*organisation, language, show them what and where to improve*" (Tutor 2) while another tutor stated: *"I indicate where they have gone wrong and try to encourage them to correct their mistakes"* (Tutor 4). Furthermore, another tutor provides *"guidelines as far as possible:—by giving alternative answers, approaches or different responses, sometimes not possible"* (Tutor 4). One tutor said: *"Start with positive things like 'I enjoyed reading your essay, your essay/language/organisation is good'. Then I indicate the areas which he/she needs to improve"* (Tutor 7).

This finding indicates a motivational role, which tutors need to adopt when responding to students' work before pointing out areas where students need to improve (Weaver, 2006). However, some responses from marked assignments indicate that, when students are doing well in an assignment, tutors tend not to give elaborate comments. In addition, what tutor-markers have said did in correspond with what they do in practice.

Generally, tutors had different views on commenting on content and grammar. One tutor said: *"I give the student what he deserves, but indicate to him/her where he went wrong with the hope that she would rectify and also give an average mark for the content and less mark for grammar obviously when the grammar is irrelevant it mostly distorts the content"* (Tutor 3). In contrast, another one said: *"I believe that the content should weigh as much as language because this is academic writing. Language can sometimes hamper content, but the language is a means to content delivery"* (Tutor 7). Furthermore, one tutor said: *"I look at the facts, the right answer more than the grammar. Although grammar is also important, correct response counts more"* (Tutor 4).

This finding indicates that it is difficult to evaluate content that is clouded by grammar mistakes. It can be deduced from these responses that both language and content are important aspects of writing and should therefore be treated equally. Disappointingly, one tutors' comment was just a phrase which stated: *"Mind your spelling"*. Some language errors were circled whereas some were ignored. Good points were appreciated and talkback was used (Lillis, 2001). The comments were not explicit enough to show the student in detail what she does right or wrong in the essay and how the student can improve future submissions. The comment is not sufficient enough as it only comments on grammar (spelling) and nothing about the content. This confirms Harris' (1977) and Fregreau's (1999) observations that teachers tend to focus more on grammar and less on content when marking essay assignments.

The responses above indicate that more attention should no longer be on surface grammar features but also on content. This suggests that focus should be on deeper writing issues. However, the finding is contrary to Harris' (1977) observation where teachers focused more on grammar when marking. Therefore, the article stresses the importance of addressing both content and grammatical aspects.

Another tutor demonstrated poor quality of marking when he/she did not even give sufficient feedback. The comment reads *"Good essay"* (Script 3). There is no evidence that the marker read the essay. Obvious grammar errors were not highlighted. Again, comments were not sufficient and a student who could have probably failed this assignment has passed with flying colours. This is an example of poor marking and this student will probably not ever come to learn that academic writing is not story-telling and is likely to repeat the same writing style in other courses, as it was earlier rewarded. However, another marker tried to give more details in his/her comments. The comments state that *"I enjoyed reading your work-has good points, language not bad but should have been edited before submission, be more relevant"*. The marker comments motivate the student and also highlight areas that need some improvement. The marking is elaborate and does not only focus on grammar errors.

In another script, the tutor never bothered to give any comment. The marker used the marking code to show the student language errors and where points are not clear for more explanation. This

is poor marking and this finding corroborates with Lea and Street's (1998), where tutors fail to identify the components of writing provided by students. This student could have just passed, but failed despite providing the work in a coherent manner and structure. Perhaps this confirms Harris' (1977) observation that tutors tend to give a lower mark to a student whose work has grammar errors despite having good content. Fregeau (1999) argues that instructors' obsession with grammar errors hurts our students.

Another tutor just gave a one-word comment (*Excellent*) on the essay. Though the student did well in the assignment, a comment like this is not sufficient to the student. The marker just ticked the paragraphs to indicate they are fine. No written comments. Again, well-written essays have fewer comments. As already indicated in interviews comments on feedback, students would like to know what they did right or wrong. Despite an excellent work by the student, the marking is of poor quality.

As confirmed by many studies, most common problems tutors commented on are grammar (spelling), coherence, organisation or structure and citing sources, which are also confirmed by responses from student questionnaire and marked assignments. As usual, tutors put more emphasis on grammar when marking whereas content is less commented on. Therefore, tutors need to address all aspects of academic writing when commenting on students' work, as the marking code for *English for Academic Purposes* module specifies. The approach used by markers is largely the Study Skills oriented, where more emphasis is put on grammar. Though grammar is an important element of writing, tutors need to shift from the Study Skills approach to the AL model where all the components of writing are also looked at.

## Recommendations

Feedback is an important teaching tool which should be used effectively in order to address issues with which students grapple. It is a beaming light in the path of learning and, if it is dim or dysfunctional, students will continue to walk in the darkness of illiteracy. The provision of marking services should provide value for money for students who paid precious tuition fees to obtain their education.

The study recommends a talkback approach as a better way of communicating with students regarding their writing. In contrast, other researchers suggest feeding forward instead of feedback. In other words, feedback should help students to produce better writing in future writing assignments. The article recommends both talkback and feeding forward as a fresh different nomenclature to feedback.

Feedback will be irrelevant and meaningless if it is written in a language students do not understand. The article recommends that feedback should be written in a clear unambiguous language.

More researchers suggest effective ways of giving feedback to students for the development of academic literacies, peer feedback such as giving dialogical and ongoing feedback (talkback). On the one hand, students struggle to understand tutor feedback whereas, on the other hand, tutors misinterpret and misread students' work as the very things they were looking for are sometimes provided but failed to recognise those aspects of writing (structure and argument).

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study do not differ much with the results presented by other studies. However, the findings of this particular study are important as they help us to understand how ESL students and tutors in an ODL context view and provide feedback, respectively. Therefore, this study contributes to the body of knowledge in the field of feedback in ESL and ODL contexts. Factors such as incomprehensible feedback, ambiguous feedback, illegible writing, and student emotions

are some of the challenges unveiled in this study. Other concepts like feedforward, feedback dialogues, talkback, student training on assimilating feedback and assessment literacy, as well as conceptualising feedback in curriculum design, are suggested as some of the strategies to provide feedback. To sum up, the findings indicate inconsistencies regarding the provision of feedback by tutors. The study also reported on the case of students who felt they deserved more and could not impress the marker despite all the hard work they put into their work. In the ODL context, feedback is not the only way students can be taught and learn, rather it is pivotal in learning and teaching strategy.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Grammar errors were not edited

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## APPENDIX 1 Student Questionnaire / Interviews Schedule

Dear Student

I am embarking on a research study entitled “Academic Writing in English Second Language contexts: Perceptions and Experiences of University first year students and tutors”. Please fill in this questionnaire as honestly as possible.

### Demographic Information

Mark the appropriate box with (X)

1. What is the name of your degree?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. How old are you?

16–19    20–23    24–27    older than 28 years

3. What is your gender?

Male        Female

4. What is your home language?

N. Sotho    Venda    Xitsonga    Setswana    Zulu    Other (Specify\_\_\_\_\_)

5. What do you do apart from being a student? You may mention your occupation (if applicable).\_\_\_\_\_

Students’ perceptions and experiences of academic writing

6. What kind of English writing tasks or activities did you do in high school?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you think your high school teachers prepared you adequately for writing essay assignments in English at university? Yes/ No

Give reasons for your answer

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. What do you think lecturers and tutors should do to help you improve your essay assignments?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. Do you think the English course for you have registered can help you to write well in other courses? Explain.

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a. Do you enjoy reading? Yes/No

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b. How often do you read?

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c. What types of books do you read? Why?

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d. Do you think reading improves your English writing skills? Why?

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10. Give your definition of good quality writing in an English essay assignment

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Students' views on feedback to their writing

11. How do you feel about the feedback you receive in your essay assignments?

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12. What do you think your lecturers/tutors should focus on when marking your essay assignments?

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13. How useful do you find markers' comments or feedback in improving your essay assignments?

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15. In your essay assignments or examinations, in which areas do you think you lose most marks?

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Students' perceptions of their academic writing skills and abilities

16. How good are you at writing essay assignments in English? Why?

Very poor	Poor	Fair to average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

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17. Which activities/writing skills do you think contribute the most in improving your essay writing?

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18. a. How important do you think the following aspects of written essays are?  
Mark the appropriate number in each case with (X)

	Not Important	Fairly important	Averagely important	Crucially important
Spelling	1	2	3	4
Punctuation	1	2	3	4
Grammar	1	2	3	4
Organisation of ideas	1	2	3	4

b. What strategies do you use when revising your essay assignments?

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c. What type of support do you require to improve in the aspects you selected in 18 a.?

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19. What steps do you follow when writing an essay assignment?

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Adapted from Margaret Van Zyl (Orr) (1993); Leki & Carson (1997)

Thank you very much for your time and patience in completing the questionnaire

## APPENDIX 2

### Tutor/Markers Questionnaire

#### Demographic Details

Mark the appropriate box with (X)

1. What is your highest qualification (in English Studies)?

Diploma      Degree      Honours      Masters      Doctorate

2. For how many years have you been teaching English?

1–5 years      6–10 years      11–15 years      16 years and above

3. How long have you been marking assignments for English first year students at university?

1–4 years      5–9 years      10–14 years      15 years & more

Tutor/markers' perceptions of students' English academic writing skills in English

4. What is your general opinion of first year students' academic writing competencies?

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5. Based on your experience what specific difficulties do students experience when writing essays?

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a. What types of writing problems do you see as the most common in students' writing?

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b. What type of writing problems do you perceive as the most serious?

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c. What kinds of strengths and/or weaknesses do you see in your students' writing?

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6. What is your definition of good quality academic writing?

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7. What do you think should be done to improve students' English writing skills?

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8. In your opinion, what could be missing from students' writing that was not addressed by the schooling system?

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9. What do you think constitutes effective teaching and learning of academic writing?

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Tutor/markers' approach in providing feedback to student writing

10. In marking an assignment, how extensively do you comment on student writing?

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11. Which approach (es) do you follow when giving feedback to students?

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12. In your position as a marker, how would you describe your relationship with the student whose work you are marking?

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13. How do you evaluate an essay assignment that has good content and poor grammar?

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14. How do you evaluate an essay assignment that has good grammar and poor content?

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Adapted from van Zyl, Margaret (1993); Leki & Carson (1997)

Thank you for your time and patience in completing this questionnaire