

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE USE OF DIALOGIC FEEDBACK IN MOBILE APPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS' WRITING: A CASE STUDY

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Previous feedback research has shown its limitation – students were unable to receive feedback after school hours for their assignments. In this study, mobile Applications (m-Apps) dialogic feedback was used to enhance and improve weak students' writing tasks. Students were able to stay in contact with their instructors after school hours for feedback. Informal learning theory was used as the theoretical framework to design the research. Eighty students participated in this study. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used in this study. All students participated in the survey process. Only twenty students were chosen to take part in the interview session. The reason for using interview was to corroborate the results with the survey administered. The outcomes of the research have shown that students were in favour of using m-Apps to provide feedback to students. However, students were not adapted to continuous correction for the contents. They were bored and sometimes confused with their work.

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Besides, students had shown their dissatisfaction over the academic term used in their work and the limited access to the internet is another issue which needs our concern. Future research can focus on the influence of sociocultural aspect in giving m-Apps dialogic feedback to students' writing tasks.

1 Introduction

The ability to perform good writing skills at higher education institutions is important because courses in universities require students to put their ideas in words and express them competently based on the specified standards and conventions (Horstmanshof & Brownie, 2013). Kellogg (2001) and the other two researchers (Shokoufeh & Tan, 2014) view writing as a process and students are required to adhere to the specified standards and conventions. They propose the process writing should involve four stages: (i). sharing of ideas (ii). generation of ideas (iii). translation of knowledge with evidence proven by data and (iv). production of an academic text. Students in their first year of university studies commonly encounter difficulty in adapting themselves to these four writing stages. They produce low-than-expected grades for assignments. Therefore, providing guidance to new university students' writing process can help them improve their writing skills. One of the ways to train these new students to write better is by providing dialogic feedback to their writing. Dialogic feedback is a two-way conversational process of sharing, exchanging and reasoning ideas between teachers and students (Gravett & Peterson, 2002). In this study, the concept of dialogic feedback is developed to actively and consistently provide and exchange ideas between teachers and students in the writing process. It aims to enhance weak students' writing skills as well as improve their contents in writing.

1.1 Limitation of Conventional Feedback in Students' Tasks

A multitude of research has been done on feedback as an effective tool to enhance and strengthen the process of students' writing. For example, the use of the high quality feedback is not only influencing and improving students' learning performance (Black & William, 1998) but also appreciated and used by students with high learning motivation (Case, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Sadler, 2010). Ferguson (2010) points out that students value feedback which is clear, constructive and helpful to their next assignment. Heller (1989), on the other hand, emphasises the originality of students' ideas or students' voices in their writing. She disagrees with students who use feedback merely directed to teachers' ideas and modify the work based on teachers' comments. Price *et al.* (2010) have questioned about students' role in receiving and using feedback. In the findings, they revealed that the basis of using feedback in writing process is trust because it is a core for students to understand the purpose of feedback.

Other previous studies on the negative perceptions of using written feedback in students' writing are shown Table 1.

Table 1
NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS ON WRITTEN FEEDBACK

a. Feedback tended to be ignored by students because the technical terms created confusion between teachers and students (e.g. Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Carless, 2006; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002; Weaver, 2006).
b. Feedback given was sometimes not timely, effective and superficial (e.g. Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Hargreaves & McCallum, 1998; Huot, 2002).
c. Feedback is discarded by students when they were unable to decipher the handwritten feedback from teachers (e.g. Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002).

The limitation in all the previous studies mentioned above is that the students are unable to seek assistance for their writing assignments after school hours. In this study, mobile Applications (m-Apps) is a tool which can be used by the weak students to stay in contact with their instructors for their writing assignments after class hours. Lee (2008) explains that students with low proficiency of English need clear and step-by-step guidance in the writing process because these students are slow in generating ideas. Thus, m-Apps and dialogic feedback are used to enhance the writing process because m-Apps are used daily by students (Purcell, Entner, & Henderson, 2010).

1.2 Mobile Learning Research in Malaysia

The research topics on mobile learning carried out in Malaysia from 2009-2014 focuses on its benefits, readiness and future planning.

Table 2:
PREVIOUS MOBILE LEARNING RESEARCH PAPERS IN MALAYSIA (2009-2014)

Topic	Scope	Author	Year
Benefits	The papers focus on its convenience and practicality of mobile learning in strengthening ESL learning.	i. Soleimani, Kemboja & Rosniah	2014
		ii. Tayebinik & Puteh	2012
		iii. Chong, Alain, Ooi & Lin	2011
	The paper focuses the advantages of using English vocabulary mobile Apps in Learning English.	Rezaei, Mai & Pesaranghader	2013

Topic	Scope	Author	Year
Readiness	The paper focuses on the readiness of students, teachers or stakeholders for using mobile learning in a university.	Abas, Chng, Mansor	2009
	The paper focuses on the readiness and perceptions of students towards using mobile phone to study English Language Literature.	i. Rahamat, Parilah, Rosseni, Juhaida	2011
Future Planning	Photo	i. Fadzleen, Halina & Abdelrahman	2014
		ii. Mohammad, Woollard	2010

Previous studies conducted in Malaysia shows insufficiency of literature reviews on the effectiveness of using m-Apps in enhancing the four skills in English Language. This paper intends to explore the students' perceptions towards using m-Apps to give dialogic feedback in weak students' writing because m-Apps offers unlimited learning and teaching spaces to students and instructors.

2 Mobile Applications (m-Apps) and Dialogic Feedback Research in Classrooms

Before the advancement of wireless technology, most research focused on SMS and mobile phones. Stone, Briggs and Smith (2003) carried out a study on the effectiveness of using SMS as a means to enhance teaching and learning. In the study, students generally liked exchanging SMS for ideas and the students became more responsive to their learning. Two drawbacks in this research were students had to spend on own money to reload their mobile credit and they sometimes encountered connection restrictions when they were away from their city. After the evolution of wireless technology, m-Apps have brought about conveniences in many areas. For example, Ally and Needham (2010) encourage students in higher institutions to return their library books via m-Apps and The Economist (2007) indicates that customers preferred to do bank transactions using m-Apps. In education, m-Apps installed in smartphones allow students to access educational materials (Ally & Tsinakos, 2014). In the findings, Ally and Tsinakos have found out that students were receptive towards Whatsapp (a kind of m-App) because it provides flexible learning styles, deters the confinement of location and distance and offers continuous coaching after school hours. It can be extended to be used in an English Language writing course in a university. Instructors are able to give their feedback to students' writing assignments via an m-App in informal learning – off school hours. In this paper, informal learning theory proposed by Dewey (1938) is adopted to design the dialogic feedback process of learning in a writing class. It supports learning settings,

authentic responses (feedback) and outside class learning hours. In establishing a dialogic feedback in informal learning environment, Nicol's (2010) three characteristics in line with the informal learning theory are adopted.

Firstly, instructors and students have to set up a mobile learning setting for dialogic feedback. Students who have understood the roles of feedback in their writing assignment won't undermine learning and feedback (Norton, 1990; Rust, Price & O' Donovan, 2003). Dialogic feedback is not only providing information to the requirements of a writing assignment but also a medium for students to clarify and reinforce task requirements.

Secondly, students have to adapt teachers' authentic feedback to be used to improve their writing tasks. One example of techno-feedback is using audio to give students feedback in their writing (Merry & Orsmond, 2008). The researchers found out that students had shown positive responses to this new tool was because of its personal, in-depth and authentic feedback given by teachers through audio recorders. This research was conducted in a school hours. However, offline feedback in helping students has not been researched yet.

Thirdly, the continuation of giving dialogic feedback between instructor and students after school hours is important to ensure the enhancement of writing process in the informal learning setting. The latest research on student-instructor dialogic interaction was conducted by Samantha *et al.* (2013). In this research, they have found out that dialogic interaction after school hours is significantly more likely to have higher ratio of students' participants.

3 Methodology

A quasi-experimental design is to adopt a mixed-method approach. The process involves manipulation of an independent variable but differs in that subjects are not assigned randomly. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2009) stated that the sample size of minimum 30 subjects for quasi-experimental research is sufficient. The participants were from a private university in Malaysia. They were required to enroll in a writing course because their standard of English meets the lowest language entry requirements. A class of 80 students from the School of Social Sciences and Humanities (45%), School of Business (30%) and School of Information, Communication and Technology (25%) who made up 51% males and 49% females involved in the research. Their mean age was 22.15 years. Their proficiency of English was below average.

Data collection instrument used was questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative research method was used to seek for information on the perceptions of students towards dialogic mobile learning in writing classes. The survey was conducted in week 15 during a lecture session. The survey constructs were based on the five constructs: flexibility, accessibility, timeliness, comprehen-

sion and transferability. A total of eighteen survey questions were used to elicit students' perceptions. Responses given were based on four-point scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Experts from different faculties were asked to validate the content of the questionnaire (Creswell, 2008). Cheng (1998) proposed to pilot the questionnaire to find its internal reliability. According to Wu (2008), a Cronbach alpha $>.600$ for questionnaire can be considered acceptable. The internal consistency of this questionnaire was found to be 0.95 (Flexibility), 0.93 (Accessibility), 0.88 (Timeliness), 0.76 (Usefulness), 0.83 (Comprehension) and 0.77 (Transferability).

In the qualitative approach, students were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. It aims to triangulate the data from the questionnaire. A total of twenty voluntary students were interviewed by ten independent interviewers based on the six constructs. The independent interviewers were research assistants engaged to carry out the interviews. Vonderwell (2003) stated that the independent interviewers were engaged to avoid biasness and ensure reliability and credibility. The interviewers had the freedom to ask additional questions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded to find the emergent themes. The researcher had discussions with the independent interviewers after each interview session. The data collected were analyzed and coded inductively by using Nvivo software. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) confirmed that the coding process is a stage of analytical discovery. The new themes discovered are important for future data exploration and analysis.

4 Results & Discussions

According to the results obtained in Table 3, 90% the students had positive perceptions towards m-learning. The connectivity internet ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.32$) showed that the students are not satisfied with the services provided. Qualitative results showed the same and students complained about the slow connection in their areas. Another significant result was the academic terms used in the instructor's feedback ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.44$). Students were not familiar with the academic terms and they felt the feedback given was not useful to help them to secure better grades. Some of the students were frustrated with the feedback and they were too busy with other work so they did not have much time to ask the instructor. It is a sad situation as their instructors had spent so much time on correcting their and the comments given were in vain to the students.

TABLE 3
QUANTITATIVE PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS m-LEARNING

Survey Scale ^a (N=80)	Mean	SD
A. Flexibility	4.40	0.81
A1. Easy to communicate with my instructor	4.10	0.77
A2. Able to receive feedback from my instructor	4.23	0.89
A3. Easy to negotiate with my instructor about my work	4.87	0.91
B. Accessibility	3.79	0.35
B1. Easy to access to the internet connection	2.40	0.32
B2. Easy to access to online materials	4.58	0.66
B3. Easy to read instructors' feedback	4.20	0.69
C. Timeliness	4.98	0.64
C1. Prompt feedback is given by my instructor	4.89	0.55
C2. Updated feedback is given to improve my work	4.77	0.71
C3. Useful feedback to improve my work	4.88	0.96
D. Comprehension	4.12	0.69
D1. Easy to understand my instructors' feedback	4.76	0.73
D2. Easy to understand the reading materials provided	4.33	0.88
D3. Easy to understand the academic terms used for feedback	3.58	0.44
E. Transferability	4.86	0.84
E1. Easy to transfer my instructor's feedback into my work	4.91	0.99
E2. Easy to transfer the materials into my work	4.32	0.63
E3. Easy to transfer the knowledge learned into my subsequent work	4.59	0.81

In addition, majority of the students pointed out that mobile dialogic feedback provided facilities such as flexibility ($M=4.40$, $SD=0.81$) and accessibility ($M=3.79$, $SD=0.35$) to help them in obtaining tutors' feedback after school hours during their interview sessions. Nurul said, "*My teacher always there [go online] and they [seem] no need sleep.....*". Lily was a shy student who uttered, "*I normally feel shy [of] asking questions on the spot.... Whatsapp has the flexibility and accessibility give me an avenue to ask questions and get feedback in a short while.... I like it.*" It is interesting to notice that all students were motivated to use social media to do their writing.

However, students were still worried about the connectivity of wireless ($M=2.40$, $SD=0.32$). Majority of them merely relied on the wireless facility in their hostels. They encountered difficulties to subscribe private wireless connection because of their financial constraint. Hence, they had stayed up late at night to complete their tasks. Nurul complained,

I always loss [lost] contact on Whatsapp with my teacher. I have to go to outside for the connection. I take hours for just two questions ask and explanations from my side too. Feedback is slow because of internet connection. I have to fight for internet connection.

To resolve the problems, instructors who teach the writing course has to produce a manual for frequent ask questions as the guidelines for basic wri-

ting problem feedback. The manual contains the ways to write good essays, the styles used for good production and the practical questions and answers. Students refer to the manual for help besides requesting instant feedback from instructors. Students are encouraged to record their questions and problems for face-to-face consultation. Their questions and problems have to append with their answers. During the consultation, they are able to utter their opinions and suggestions. It trains the students to be independent in learning.

Students have different views on m-Apps as an effective dialogic tool in giving timely ($M=4.98$, $SD=0.64$), comprehensible ($M=4.12$, $SD=0.69$) and transferable ($M=4.86$, $SD=0.84$) feedback to help their writing. Mary, who was always the first student sent her questions or comments to instructor said, "I always get teacher's comments so late and I cannot follow my writing plan.... The most sad [saddest] part is I don't know what my teacher's commented and I cannot change my writing. I have to ask him many many times for his comment....but it is new and good experience to me." The feedback given to her was not in time and she was incomprehensible about the feedback so the information in feedback was not transferred and translated into her writing.

Jimmy was contended with the feedback given. He said, "...I cannot write... I ask teacher about my sentence, she said this right, this wrong...I correct follow her advise [ce] so I got good grade at last." Jimmy was a case which proved the effective characteristics of NCMF in helping students improve their writing. However, Jimmy showed only little improvement. He received personal coaching sessions from the tutor. It gave a good opportunity to him to improve his language and at last his writing skills.

Only one student commented that mobile dialogic feedback was tedious and needed continuous efforts to do correction. After school hours, he did not want his private lives to be disturbed. Receiving excessive feedback was nuisance to him and most importantly, he hated the excessive correction. Osman, whose command of English is average stated,

"I think instructions given in class help me. After being at home, I don't have to see my teacher and my headache lost. The course requires me to ask questions by using social media so I am forced to do so. I prefer teacher to give his feedback in class because classroom interaction gives personal touch and I like face-to-face interaction. Mobile dialogic feedback is liveless and I don't need much help from the instructor as my command of English is still OK. And mobile dialogic feedback keeps on changing my ideas. I am somehow lost my focus in writing because too many ideas are given."

This was newly discovered in the interview. Excessive correction on the same piece of work had de-motivated him. He felt irritated for not completing the work on time because he was confused in the comments given. He faced problems in choosing the good feedback. Besides, he had other tasks to be

completed. Therefore, he were unable to spend too much of time on the same writing task repeatedly. He preferred to consult his instructor at school and deterred long hours of work. Peterson (2010) entailed that meeting students face-to-face or written feedback are both constructive tools to help students in their writing process. Good writing takes time. Patience is important when the instructor is guiding the students.

In this study, students were able to ask questions via their social media tool during and after school hours. Six students who had little knowledge about writing shared their opinions about mobile dialogic feedback. Mohammed, one of the students, indicated that,

“mobile dialogic feedback is good, I can chat with my teacher after class. I keep on pushing my teacher for her answer [the student wants instant feedback] but she don't give me. Because of it, I sent many many mails [messengers] to her to alert her. After that, she replied but I don't know what is that [the student cannot understand the feedback].”

Students were not competent in rendering questions to their instructors. Confusions took place. Students tended to be aggressive while awaiting the new feedback from instructors. They sent out lots of messengers to the instructors just to complete their work. They became self-centred and the lives of instructors were disturbed. In addition, their questions were not attended professionally because of the absence of instructors. When the instructors checked the messengers, they were shock of excessive messengers. As a result, they tended to give explicit explanations. It demotivated students' learning attitude as they longed for constructive and practical feedback. What they received for feedback was technical and they were unable transfer it into the writing. In addition, the size of class is big. An instructor was unable to respond to all the questions. A trained assistant instructor or programmed feedback in hand-phone is a helper to the instructor. Another way to address the problem is to request peers to provide feedback. Johana, Nor, Ahmad and Ambigapathy (2012) confirmed that peers feedback helps instructors who handle weak students in a classroom. Before the peers provide feedback, they have to undergo trainings to ensure the reliability of feedback.

Hence, the use of mobile dialogic feedback should be balanced because of students' constraint of time, workload and burden. For in-class feedback, teachers plan their lesson which caters to students' needs. Instructors should provide students with detailed essay writing guidelines. Instructors have to respect students' ideas. Instructors' feedback has to be suggestive rather than prescriptive. At home, mobile dialogic feedback becomes the guidelines for writing tasks. Time for consultation using mobile dialogic feedback should be fixed so that instructors are able to give timely, useful, comprehensible, transferable feedback. Students do not have to wait for their instant feedback

few hours later. Immediate assistant is rendered to resolve the problems in the writing task. Instructors are advised not to provide direct remedy to students' problem. Giving feedback in a good question form helps students to think rationally. Students have to cultivate problem-solving skills in the writing process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the quantitative and qualitative results have generally shown that the students were benefited by mobile dialogic feedback as students are able to use it without location restrictions. Mobile dialogic feedback provides positive facilities such as flexibility, accessibility, timeliness, usefulness, comprehension and transferability. However, students are not in favour of excessive correction for their work, limited access to internet and the use of academic terms in receiving feedback from their lecturers. Hence, teachers have to find an alternative to arouse students' interest in doing correction. All the students are receptive to the use of mobile dialogic feedback in their writing process.

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