

# **Teacher-student Conferencing: Implications for Teaching L2 Writing**

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by  
Annie Sui-Ping LEUNG BA(London), MA (Hong Kong)

School of Education  
University of Leicester

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Annie Sui-Ping LEUNG

## Abstract

It is common practice in Hong Kong for teachers of English as a second language to provide their students with written commentary as the sole source of feedback on their writing. However, there are teachers who question the efficacy of their own writing feedback and express concerns about providing commentary in ways that help their students to effectively revise their texts and to acquire skills that can be applied in future writing tasks. This study set out to test whether teacher-student conferencing could lead to greater improvement in both content and grammatical accuracy in writing tasks. After a pilot study, the main study was carried out on 34 students, who were in their sixth year in secondary school. They were randomly allocated to either the control or experimental group, with the 17 students in the control group receiving written commentary, and the 17 students in the experimental group receiving teacher-student conferencing as their writing feedback. Findings of the main study revealed a statistically significant difference in students' performance between the experimental and control groups ( $p < 0.05$ ). The effect size was very large (eta squared  $> 0.14$ ) in both the paired-samples t-test and the mixed between-within ANOVA. These suggest that teacher-student feedback sessions facilitate improvement more than written feedback. Semi-structured interviews were used with six of the participants to determine student perceptions of the different feedback modes. Analysis of findings revealed that all six interviewees expressed a preference for teacher-student conferencing. These findings were validated through conferences and post conference interviews with another small group of students. The study makes a case for more interactive modes of feedback which focus on the process as well as the product of writing, and for more open teacher-student exchange about the nature of feedback offered in second language classrooms in Hong Kong.

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# Chapter 1

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher feedback which leads to successful text revision has been widely acknowledged as a crucial component in the writing process. With the development of learner-centered approaches and the prevalence of interactionist theories in the 1970s, which put emphasis on the value of reader response and the dialogic nature of writing, teacher feedback to student writing was no longer restricted to just written commentary. In fact, the importance of teachers providing face to face feedback to students on a one-on-one basis started to gain ground in North America (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p.1-2). In particular, the adoption of “process writing” resulted in a shift of focus in the teaching of writing. English language teachers gradually became aware that writing instruction should no longer be focused on merely grammatical concerns but rather on the discovery of ideas and meaning. This is achieved through engaging student writers in multiple drafts and then providing them with feedback during the composing process rather than at the end of it.

The study in this paper addresses the nature of feedback in relation to student outcomes in writing, within a particular Hong Kong classroom. The specific nature of the study will be outlined after an overview of some of the background and contextual issues surrounding this topic.

## **1.1 Instructional context of the teaching and learning of writing in Hong Kong**

Effective feedback, according to Freedman (1985, p.xi), has the powerful potential of facilitating “a revision of cognition itself that stems from response”. However, whether the revision can really lead to an improvement in writing depends not only on the writer’s ability but also on the quality of the feedback received. As Hedgcock & Lefkowitz (1992, p.256) pointed out, revision is “a complex process carried out with varying degrees of success depending upon the writer’s competence and the effectiveness of the instructions received”. As the success of students’ revision of their texts depends to a large extent on the quality of instruction they receive, having an understanding of the classroom context where the teaching of writing takes place is therefore essential.

### ***1.1.1 Examination-oriented culture of teaching***

Richards & Lockhart (1994, p.98) describe the role of a teacher in a typical “traditional” school, that also applies to the teaching situation in Hong Kong. They explain how the school operates strictly on a hierarchical system under the leadership of the principal, with the support of several senior teachers and a large number of regular teachers. The principal and senior teachers are responsible for making key decisions. Regular teachers do most of the teaching and are required to perform other duties when necessary. They teach according to teaching schedules, but there is little monitoring of what they actually teach or how they teach it. Teachers in Hong Kong, in particular, are generally not assessed on the quality of teaching but on the performance of their students in public examinations (with Secondary five students sitting for the *Hong Kong Certificate of*

*Education Examination* and the Secondary seven students sitting for the *Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination*).

Morris (1990, p.56) commented that the public examination was the guiding force in the Hong Kong school curriculum. This is further supported in the findings of the interviews conducted by Sengupta & Falvey (1998, p.82) with English language teachers in Hong Kong. It was reported that “Every teacher interviewed mentioned the examination, irrespective of whether or not they taught the examination classes, i.e. Secondary 5 and 7 (Grades 11 and 13)”.

It is difficult to overemphasize the impact of this examination culture on teacher practice, not only in terms of feedback that teachers offer, but also on their beliefs about the very nature of writing.

As well as being driven by examination requirements, teachers have to contend with workload issues. A secondary-level English teacher teaches an average of three English classes, with about 40 students in each class. There is a minimum number of writing assignments to be completed in each term. Students submit a composition once every 2 or 3 weeks. Students in Secondary 1-3 (Grades 7-8) are required to write about 120-250 words for each piece of writing, whereas students in Secondary 5-6 (Grades 9-10) write about 300 words, and in Secondary 6-7 (Grades 12-13), an average of 500 words. This adds up to a lot of writing on which to give feedback. As a result, teachers tend to focus on what they consider to be the highest priority, which is giving the kind of feedback that

helps students for examinations. As will become clear in the next section, this usually implies a focus on error-free writing.

### ***1.1.2 Focus on error-free writing***

The way writing is taught and the control individual teachers exert on their students in Hong Kong can vary from school to school. However, Mahon (1992) points out that in general there is an overwhelming demand for primary pupils to produce error-free compositions rather than to develop their ideas during the composing process (1992, p.74). In the same way, teachers at secondary level also respond to student writing using a product-oriented approach. They tend to treat each piece of writing as a final draft and focus their attention on surface errors rather than on the content of student writing. In this way, students' writing becomes a showcase for their language skills rather than an expression of particular ideas. As suggested above, a key reason for teachers' eagerness to help their students produce error-free sentences is that they are deeply affected by the exam-oriented culture in the education system. This examination culture has affected teachers' marking of their students' writing so that, for example, students are not required to produce multiple drafts because they need time to write a great variety of text types for public examinations. Teachers focus on accuracy because they think this is one of the major criteria in assessing student writing in the public examination. This is reflected in the words of one English teacher in a study by Lee (2008, p.80): "In HKCEE, compositions with good grammatical accuracy are rated highly, irrespective of content, so it is important to help students avoid the basic errors in writing, since this is totally unacceptable". Pennington & Cheung (1995) commented that "The traditional product

focus of composition instruction conceptualizes writing as essentially a piece of written work to be individually produced (by the student) and marked (by the teacher), mainly outside of regular class time and activities” (1995, p.20). When students’ writing is returned to them, they are often instructed to correct the errors by rewriting the whole piece of composition or just to correct those sentences that contain the errors. Students are seldom required to revise the content of their writing.

Findings of the study conducted by Sengupta & Falvey (1998) shed light on this situation. Interview data in Sengupta & Falvey’s study reveal that the teaching of L2 writing by English language teachers in Hong Kong is mainly dominated by language-related concerns at the sentence level with minimal focus on either the discourse-related or cognitive aspects of writing, that is, to help student writers develop strategies for generating, drafting and refining ideas (1998, p.78-79). The majority of teacher participants who were interviewed in this study did not consider helping students to construct meaning in their writing as central to their jobs as English language teachers. They seemed to be more concerned with the development of syntactic maturity among students which could be manifested in students’ ability to produce error-free sentences. The exchange in the following extract from Sengupta & Falvey (1998, p.80) demonstrates how language rather than content is the predominant concern for English language teachers.

Researcher: Yes, so you do not look for the quality of ideas?

Teacher: I first look for the language – I think to us – to Hong Kong English teachers – errors are very important – it is our way –



we are very upset by errors – we think errors really give a bad impression – you know I think if any Chinese teacher says that they don't – that she doesn't mind errors as long as the content is good – then they are not Hong Kong people. Are you surprised?

(Sengupta & Falvey, 1998, p.80)

Although teachers in Sengupta & Falvey's study (1998, p.80) admit that they address only language related issues in students' compositions, there are other studies, which reveal English language teachers' perception of their role in helping students to improve their language proficiency (Richards, Tung, & Ng 1991, Mahon, 1992, Lee, 1998 & 2008). However, this role may be subjugated to real or perceived school demands for teachers to focus on errors in writing. As will be outlined below, school policy demands tend to override systemic or even personal positions on the teaching of writing.

### ***1.1.3 School-based policies versus curriculum document-based policies***

In Hong Kong secondary schools, writing is considered to be crucial in the language development of students. However, the official guidelines provided for the teaching of writing fail to draw teachers' attention to the importance of and nature of effective response to students' texts. The *Syllabuses for secondary schools: English Language (Secondary 1-5)* developed by the Curriculum Development Council [CDC], is the only official guide for English teachers in Hong Kong. In this document, there is no specific section that addresses the issue of feedback response except that the guidelines for giving feedback are interspersed among the principles for the teaching of writing. For example,

teachers “must avoid providing detailed editing comments on the surface form without paying attention to organizational and content issues” (Curriculum Development Council [CDC], 1999, p.94). As for error correction, it is suggested that comprehensive marking of students’ grammatical errors should be avoided as “Total correction is time-consuming for the teacher and discouraging for the learners, particularly when the latter see their papers full of red ink” (Curriculum Development Council [CDC], 1999, p.94).

In any event, in this writer’s experience, most English language teachers do not consciously follow the principles recommended in the official document as each school has a feedback policy stipulated by the English panel chair, and English teachers are required to respond to student writing in ways explained below.

Findings in a study by Lee (2008) revealed that many English teachers in Hong Kong were expected to give detailed response to student writing. It was commented that apart from using correction symbols, teachers were required to provide correct sentences or expressions when they thought their students might not be able to self-correct their mistakes. The importance of an error-free corrected version was emphasized. Although detailed written comments were not required, most teachers were expected to provide their students with general comments about their work (Lee, 2008, p.78). Conformity to the feedback policy, that is, providing detailed error feedback plus a variety of written comments on students’ texts, was one of the deciding factors for a positive or negative evaluation of the teachers’ performance in the appraisal conducted once or twice a year. Any deviation from the established practice, would lead to accusations of unsatisfactory teaching and would need justification. In such a context, teachers

report feeling disempowered when their teaching beliefs were incongruent with the school policy and they had no alternative but to follow the established practice in the school (Lee, 2008, p.79).

Regarding teachers' use of curriculum documents to guide classroom practices, Richards, Tung & Ng (1991, p.89) reported that over half of them rarely (41%) or never (13%) consulted the English language syllabus (an official document where basic principles and guidelines are laid down for teaching the subject). Only 13% of the respondents claimed that they consulted it only once or twice a year; while only about a quarter (27%) said that they would describe it as a definitive guide to English language teaching in Hong Kong.

## **1.2 Teacher attitudes and perspectives and their impact on the writing practices**

A study of the culture of English language teachers in Hong Kong was carried out by Richards, Tung, & Ng (1991) to determine how teachers perceived their role as language teachers, the attitudes and values they subscribed to, and how they characterized their classroom practices. The "culture of teaching" is described by Feiman-Nemser & Floden as being "embodied in the work-related beliefs and knowledge teachers share — beliefs about appropriate ways of acting on the job and rewarding aspects of teaching, and knowledge that enables teachers to do their work" (Wittrock, 1986, p.508).

The work of Richards et al (1991, p.89) has already been cited regarding teachers' lack of reference to the official curriculum documents for advice and guidelines on their teaching practice. Even so, teachers often report a very grand view of their work and purpose. When the teachers were asked what they believed their main role was as English language

teachers, they claimed that it was to help students discover effective approaches to learning (32%), to pass knowledge and skills to pupils (32%), and to adapt teaching methods to meet students' needs (16%) (1991, p.92). Although this study's findings reveal that English language teachers are aware of the crucial role they play in helping their students improve their language skills, their beliefs about their role may not be evident in their practice.

A study conducted by Lee (1998, p.69) to investigate teachers' beliefs regarding the teaching and learning of writing reveals that a gap exists between teachers' beliefs about writing and their own practice. Although most of the teachers in Lee's study think that discourse coherence is essential to the development of a student's writing ability, the findings suggest that teachers in her study attend primarily to grammar in their evaluation of students' work and in their own teaching. She concluded that English language teachers may not have adequate knowledge about the nature of writing or possess appropriate techniques for teaching writing in the classroom. Lee's findings (1998) concur with the findings of Cohen (1987), who also commented that teachers' beliefs about their effectiveness in teaching writing may not really reflect reality. He concluded that teacher feedback "as currently constituted and realized, may have more limited impact on the learners than the teachers would desire" (1987, p.66). The contradictions between teachers' beliefs and their actual practice are major causes for concern and attempts to understand the causes of this discrepancy are necessary before measures can be taken to address these problems and to improve effectiveness in classroom teaching. Some of these causes will be considered here.

### ***1.2.1 Teacher workloads***

One of the factors which effects teachers' response to student writing in the Hong Kong context is that English language teachers have to teach large classes and carry a heavy load, which make it difficult to adopt time-consuming teaching practices such as the process approach in the teaching of writing. Furthermore, the use of textbooks, rigid directives, and timetables reinforce a product-oriented testing approach in the writing class rather than encouraging teachers to adopt a more innovative approach in the teaching of writing (Lee, 2008, p.79). Therefore, even though teachers may have the belief that a particular mode of teacher feedback is useful, they are not encouraged to pursue this because of the need to conform to the official guidelines and established practices in the school. If the product-oriented approach is adopted in the teaching of writing, it will be pointless for teachers to provide intermediate feedback to students during the writing process as students are only required to produce single-drafts.

### ***1.2.2 Lack of theoretical grounding***

Another potential cause of the discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and practice is that teachers in Hong Kong may in fact be unfamiliar with the theoretical background of second language writing theories. Many English language teachers hold the view that teaching is a practical activity, and there is no need for them to be familiar with the theories of teaching the subject. They have the misconception that they are not curriculum designers, and are therefore not required to make educational decisions. This attitude is described by Stern (1983, p.23) who notes that teachers regard themselves as

“practical people and not as theorists”. He further contends that teachers believe that theories and practice do not work together.

Language teachers can be said to regard themselves as practical people and not as theorists. Some might even say they are opposed to “theory”, expressing their opposition in such remarks as “It’s all very well in theory, but it won’t work in practice”.

(Stern, 1983, p.23)

Yet the importance of understanding theories is highlighted by van Lier (1994, p.7), who suggests that familiarity with second language writing theories can encourage teachers “to become critical and reflective practitioners, researchers of their own professional life, and agents of change”. Polio (2003) also acknowledges the fact that understanding theories of second language writing can not only equip writing teachers with the knowledge to evaluate current instructional paradigms from a well-grounded, critical standpoint but also enables them to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching (2003, p.60). Thus, they are guided in making sensible pedagogical decisions that can be translated into classroom practices.

Without this theoretical framework for decision making, teachers are at a clear disadvantage in terms of matching practices to beliefs, and at recognising possible discrepancies between what they maintain they are trying to achieve and how they go about this in their teaching.

### **1.2.3 “Client” pressure**

Even though there are teachers who are aware of the inadequacies of the current feedback practices which may have direct impact on the effectiveness of teaching, these teachers “are bound to face difficulties of implementation as well as considerable systemic pressure back to traditional norms, including pressure from the students” ... [especially when] ... there is no way to know whether a new method will help or harm students in the preparation for examinations” (Pennington, Brock & Yue, 1996, p.152). Research has demonstrated that Hong Kong is under an education system which focuses on qualifications rather than individual development, so that teachers are expected to cover and students to master the maximum amount of content that is directly relevant to the examinations (Morris, 1985). Therefore, students and their parents have a strong expectation that schooling will cover specific content and prepare students for examinations. An understanding of the learning culture among students in Hong Kong will be helpful in understanding issues related to the giving of and nature of feedback, and will show that teachers are not solely responsible for students’ lack of progress in writing.

### **1.3 Learning culture among students**

The importance of examinations in the Hong Kong education context is not only felt by teachers, but by students as well. In fact, Morris (1995) commented that the *Hong Kong Certificate of Education* (HKCEE), which students take in Secondary 5 (Grade 11) had profoundly influenced secondary education:

Public examinations have dominated the process of learning and teaching in Hong Kong secondary schools. The need to ‘cover the syllabus’ and

maximize pupils' examination results has been a major influence on pedagogy and it is a major source for motivating pupils.

(Morris, 1995, p.114)

Under the heavy influence of the examination system, both teachers and students viewed English teaching in the classroom as “preparing students to pass public examinations” (Richards et al., 1991, p.83). To prepare students well for examinations, English teachers only focused on providing students with examination practice, giving them model answers and examination tips (Morris, 1995). Teachers have the belief that adopting the traditional product-oriented approach in teaching writing is a more effective method to prepare students for the examination rather than the more innovative process-oriented methods recommended in the syllabus. Not only teachers, but students also have the misconception that “composing is primarily or essentially a matter of getting clearly in mind what we want to say, and then finding the words that will record those meanings and make them available to others” (Booth & Richards, 1986, p.455). This misconception is reinforced by product-based pedagogies that have always placed much emphasis on the correctness of the language used.

Students are so eager to do well in examinations that they may not be interested in learning how to develop critical thinking and revising skills. They often equate good writing in English with error-free writing and expect their teachers to correct all errors in their written work. Teachers in Hong Kong are held accountable to their students (and parents) who expect their teachers to conduct comprehensive checking of their grammar mistakes in their writing, without realising that research studies suggest there is no



difference in the degree of student improvement in grammar regardless of the types of response given to written errors (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986, p.91). Therefore, the time and effort spent on eliminating them would seem pointless, and can be “more profitably spent in responding to more important aspects of student writing” (1986, p.91).

Besides students’ eagerness to do well in examinations, there are culturally bound assumptions about what they think the teacher’s responsibility is and what learning is. Some of them are so examination-oriented that they think the teachers’ role in the classroom is “giver of knowledge”, and their main contribution to their learning is to help them pass examinations. In some cultures, teaching is viewed as a teacher-controlled and directed process. For example, the Chinese attitude toward learning has been summarized in these terms:

Learning involves mastering a body of knowledge, a body of knowledge that is presented by a teacher in chunks small enough to be relatively easily digested. Both teachers and learners are concerned with the end product of learning, that is, they expect that the learner will, at an appropriate time, be able to reproduce the knowledge in the same form as it was presented to him by his teacher.

(Brick, 1991, p.154)

It is under these circumstances that students expect their English language teachers to provide detailed response to their writing, that is, comprehensive checking of errors. However, this practice is not without problems as many teachers are doubtful of the time

they spend responding to student writing and of the potential benefits of their commentaries on their students. All these will be dealt with in the section below.

#### **1.4 Problems with the current teacher written response**

English language teachers in Hong Kong often face the problem of effectively responding to student writing in the course of everyday teaching. Teachers often find their teaching of writing in English as a very difficult and frustrating task. It is very common to hear English teachers complain that they have to spend hours on end marking student manuscripts which are often dry, mechanical, grammatically poor, repetitive in terms of ideas, and full of unsupported generalisations. Teachers find reading the written works of their students a thankless and unrewarding task, and at the same time, students do not enjoy the process of writing as they find that they lack ideas and do not possess the necessary vocabulary prowess or proper syntax to express themselves well. It may sometimes be the case that when manuscripts are marked and returned, students feel too frustrated to even bother looking at the mistakes identified and/or corrected for them. If they are asked to perform corrections, they just copy the corrected language without understanding why they have to make the revisions.

#### **1.5 Aims of the study**

Over the years, English language teachers have acknowledged that responding to student writing is central to teaching and that it plays a crucial role in determining whether effective writing instruction is achieved or not. However, that still leaves the question of how to most effectively provide teacher commentary that helps students with their revision of texts and promotes their development as more effective writers; a question

with which many English language teachers are grappling. It has always been this writer's belief that teacher-student writing conferences may be helpful in improving the effectiveness of teachers' responses to student writing as the conferencing events offer opportunities for teachers and students to interact, negotiate and to clarify difficult issues (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999) and help teachers to avoid appropriating student texts (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982, Sommers, 1982, and Zamel, 1985).

The aim of this study was to find whether teacher-student conferencing can lead to greater improvement in both content and grammatical accuracy as a result of the different treatment students receive on their written assignments, with one group receiving written feedback and the other group, teacher-student conferencing. The term 'feedback' as defined in this study refers to the comments given to students' writing performance in terms of the content (relevance, coherence, and organization) and grammar (vocabulary, language use and mechanics), with students in the control group receiving written feedback and students in the experimental group receiving verbal feedback (teacher-student conferencing). However, the focus of feedback provided for the two groups was the same; content and grammar. One of the main differences between the two modes of feedback is that the inherent nature of verbal feedback offers opportunities for teacher and students to interact, negotiate and ask for clarifications, which are absent in the written commentary. The interactive nature of the writing conferences is viewed by Carnicelli as more effective than other modes of feedback as it allows exchanges "between two parties, a teacher and a student, not a teacher and a class. The conversation between these two parties, rather than statements or written comments by only one, is the

strength of the conference method” (1980, p.101). To enhance the reliability of the findings, guidelines for conducting teacher-student conferencing were produced for this study, and it was expected that they should be adhered to when verbal feedback was provided for students in the experimental group.

After a pilot study, the main study was carried out on 34 students, who are in their sixth year in secondary school. They were randomly allocated to each of two groups, with 17 students in the experimental group receiving teacher-student conferencing as the mode of writing feedback and 17 students in the control group receiving written commentary. Six semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted to validate the research findings in the main study and to find out students’ feelings towards the two kinds of feedback on writing.

To overcome the limitations and potential barriers to student responses by the researcher being the students’ teacher, two additional group interviews were subsequently conducted with students who were not taught by the researcher. These students were then interviewed by another teacher, not the main researcher.

This study aims to determine the following:

- ◆ Students’ reactions to different modes of feedback on writing, namely, written feedback or verbal feedback (conferencing).
- ◆ Means of enhancing the effectiveness of English teachers’ commentaries and students’ revisions.

- ◆ Whether or not students' interest in learning English can be enhanced by improving their writing abilities.

### ***1.5.1 Assumptions***

- A. As the main study was completed within six months and the researcher taught both classes using the same teaching methods, it was assumed that any teaching effects in the experiment should not have a major impact on the reliability of the findings of this study.
- B. The English language proficiency of the 34 students who participated in the main study is assumed to be similar as most of them achieved either Grade D or Grade E (the pass grades) in English Language at the HKCEE in the year prior to their admission to Secondary 6 (Grade 12) and were all preparing to sit for the *Advanced Supplementary Use of English Examination* on their completion of Secondary 7 (Grade 13).
- C. It is anticipated that differences in students' language proficiency may not negatively impact on the reliability and validity of the findings as one of the aims of the study is to compare the mean scores of student writing between the pre-test and post-test in both the experimental group and control group to find out which mode of feedback, teacher-student conferencing or written feedback, is more effective for the students. In short, the "distance travelled" by students is more significant for this study than particular starting or finishing points in terms of their proficiency.

D. Neither A nor B applies to the subsequent groups who were involved in conferences.

In these groups, teaching and proficiency varied. The overall assumption is that while these factors may impact on how specific students interact in conferences, they would not be likely to interfere with any benefit in conferencing over written feedback alone for any group. These students will, therefore, contribute to the scope of the research question by including evidence of benefits or otherwise of conferencing for a range of students.

## **1.6 Significance of the study**

Writing is an intensely personal activity because students' motivation, interest, and confidence in writing may be adversely affected by the feedback they receive. As Daiker pointed out, adverse responses of any kind may encourage writing apprehension and lock students into a cycle of failure, lack of motivation, and further failure (1989, p.106). Since the feedback from teachers can play a significant role in the development of students' writing ability, a better understanding of the nature of teacher feedback and the various modes of teacher delivery is necessary if its potential is to be exploited more effectively.

It is hoped that the findings in this study can highlight some of the problems inherent in providing students with only written feedback for their writing; and encourage teachers to allocate some time for face-to-face discussion with students about their writing so as to gain awareness of their perspectives and the problems encountered during the writing process. This will encourage students to revise their work more effectively and consequently learn for future writing opportunities. At the same time, findings of this

study can help to highlight the awareness of English language teachers to consider other modes of writing feedback and reflect on their own feedback practices to cater for the individual needs of the students.

While research has been conducted on the benefits of conferencing as a means of feedback for first and second language learners of English in Western contexts with Western teachers, as the literature review will show, there has been little research on how well this applies to diverse contexts, and in particular, Hong Kong. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge about the applicability of teacher-student conferences for the Hong Kong educational context.

## **1.7 Outline of the thesis**

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 presents the Literature Review, which discusses the issues in relation to the use of written response to writing and the theoretical perspectives and advantages in the use of teacher-student conferencing as a mode of feedback to student writing. Chapter 3 describes and explains the research design and the methods used for data collection and analysis in this study. Chapter 4 reports the findings of the study. Chapter 5 discusses the research findings and the pedagogical implications of teaching writing. Chapter 6 discusses the limitations of this study and the recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 2

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This Literature Review looks at the nature of writing and writing feedback over time and currently. The first section provides an overview of different writing approaches and their effects on teacher response to student writing between the late 1960s and the early twenty first century. While discussing the effects of teacher commentary on student writing, attention is also given to error correction in student writing. This general overview will then move to a specific focus on the teaching and learning of writing in second language classrooms in Hong Kong.

From this overview, a rationale will emerge for teacher-student conferencing as a mode of teacher feedback. Therefore, a significant portion of the Literature Review will address conferencing, including a descriptive explanation of this strategy, the theoretical underpinnings, and the benefits which are attributed to it. A discussion on the formats and qualities of successful conferences will be included.

To contribute to the identification of factors which maximize the effectiveness of conferencing, studies on L1 and L2 teacher-student conferences are cited. Particular attention will be focused on the nature of teacher and student roles, and the impact of cultural aspects, as these have a direct bearing on the implementation of such conferences in the Hong Kong context.



## **2.1 Overview of writing approaches**

Developments in ESL (also referred to as L2 in this paper) composition have been strongly influenced by and, to a certain extent, are parallel to developments in the teaching of writing to native speakers of English (L1 in this paper). Although L1 and L2 can refer to any language as a first or second language, for the purposes of this study, L1 and L2 are used to refer to the learning and use of English by those from English and non-English speaking backgrounds respectively. It is easy to trace the major effects of the principles of L1 writing pedagogy on L2 writing from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the late 1990s. Even today, if we examine research papers on issues related to L2 writing, we will find that a substantial number of bibliographical references come from L1 sources (e.g. Hughey et al, 1983).

To better understand how L2 teacher response is influenced by L1 writing pedagogy, an understanding of the development and evolution of L1 writing pedagogy, including beliefs about the purpose and nature of writing, is necessary. This is primarily because teacher responses to student writing are believed to reflect underlying assumptions about the nature and function of writing. As Beach & Bridwell (1984) commented:

The attitudes that teachers have toward writing strongly influence their own teaching practices, particularly their evaluation of student writing. Their beliefs ... serve as filters that train their attention to qualities (or lack thereof) in student writing.

(Beach & Bridwell, 1984, p.312)

### ***2.1.1 Product-oriented instructional traditions in L1 writing***

Prior to the mid-1960s, teaching writing to native English speakers at the high school and college levels was mainly based on the understanding and interpretation of literary texts such as novels, short stories, plays, and essays. Little instructional time was devoted to planning, drafting, sharing, or revising written products. Writing teachers conducted their teaching of writing based on the textbooks of the period, which was a fairly standard practice then. According to Kroll (2001, p.219-220), writing instruction normally included the following steps:

- ◆ Instruct students on the principles of rhetoric and organization, presented as “rules” for writing.
- ◆ Provide a text for classroom discussion, analysis, and interpretation (preferably a work of literature).
- ◆ Require a writing assignment (accompanied by an outline) based on the text.
- ◆ Read, comment on, and criticize student papers prior to beginning the next assignment in this cycle.

This approach is known as the “traditional paradigm” (Hairston, 1982, p.87). Because writing teachers within this paradigm were mainly concerned with evaluating the written products of students, with little attention given to the strategies and processes involved in the production of the written discourse, this is also known as the “product approach” (Kroll, 2001, p.220). Although this approach was widely adopted in the

United States from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 1960s, this model of instruction was not based on empirical evidence. Furthermore, it had not been tested against the composing processes of actual writers (Hairston, 1982, p.78).

The adoption of this “traditional paradigm” in the teaching of writing reflected a perspective in which the written products of students were viewed as static representations of their learning and content knowledge. Therefore, in L1 writing classrooms, teacher feedback was mainly restricted to commenting on students’ conformity to the established rhetorical forms or patterns rather than developing the students’ competence in drafting a coherent, meaningful piece of connected discourse (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p.4-5).

### ***2.1.2 Rationale for the process approach in L1 writing***

In the last 15 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the product-oriented approach in L1 has been repeatedly attacked for several reasons, one of which is its failure to provide effective instruction in what is often called the “prewriting stage” of the composing process. Criticism has also been aimed at the failure of this approach to develop students’ analytical and synthetic skills, which can contribute to good thinking. Regarding the importance of attending to these skills, Rohman (1965) argued that attention to the logical construction and arrangement of discourse forms may not be of much help in students’ becoming effective writers if their cognitive and synthetic skills remain undeveloped. He claimed that “Without the rhetoric of the mind ... no course in the rhetoric of the word could make up for the fact that the writer has discovered essentially nothing to say” (1965, p.112).

In addition, researchers and writing teachers eventually became aware that writing is not just a matter of arranging ideas within a prescribed pattern or helping learners remember and execute these patterns (Hyland 2003, p.7). They began to realise that the focus on students' written products was unsatisfactory as this failed to provide them with a better understanding of the composing process, which could help them with their writing instruction. The controlled composition or guided writing approach, which focuses students' attention on usage, structure, and correct form, and ignores the composition, formulation and development of ideas, may not be helpful to develop the writing ability of students.

The lack of understanding of the composing process has led to the misunderstanding of the composing process. Students who are taught to write within this paradigm tend to "think that the point of writing is to get everything right the first time and that the need to change things is the work of the amateur" (Shaughnessy, 1977, p.79). They have the misconception that "writers know the form before they know the content" (Murray 1980, p.13), and that writers "know exactly what they are going to say before they say it" (Murray 1978, p.100). Many students also believe that "composing is primarily or essentially a matter of getting clearly in mind what we want to say, and then finding the words which will record those meanings and make them available to others" (Booth & Richards, 1986, p.455).

Adopting a case study approach, Emig (1971) observed a variety of behaviors of L1 student writers during the composing process. The findings revealed that during the composing process, the writers often tried to re-examine what they had written in order

to discover the direction of their thoughts. Such composing processes were similar to those identified by other researchers. Britton (1978), for example, noted that “We [shape] the utterances as we write; and when the seam is ‘played out’ or we are interrupted, we get started again by reading what we have written” (1978, p.24).

Subsequent to such research on how writers actually go about their writing, a writer-based process has emerged as a new model of writing. It has led to a paradigm shift from the product-oriented approach to the process-oriented approach in the teaching of writing. This shift in paradigm has inevitably resulted in the shift of focus in teacher feedback and the modes of feedback provided for students, which will be further outlined below.

### ***2.1.3 Focus on feedback: teacher roles and responses***

The view of writing taken by the teacher impacts significantly on the kind of feedback offered to students. When teachers assume a product-view of writing, the dominant form of feedback is written commentary, on the finished draft. Yet, according to Knoblauch & Brannon (1981), responses that merely focus on evaluating the product are of limited value because they do not offer the kind of advice that will help the novice writers improve the texts they are working on or acquire the skills that they are likely to need to develop their writing ability over the long term. They commented that

students write essays and teachers describe their strengths and weaknesses, grading them accordingly. The essays are then retired and new ones are composed, presumably under the influence of recollected judgments of the

previous ones. Our assumption has been that evaluating the product of composing is equivalent to intervening in the process.

(Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981, p.2)

Yet, as Marzano & Arthur further argue, “Different types of teacher comments on student themes have equally small influences on student writing. For all practical purposes, commenting on student essays might just be an exercise in futility” (Marzano & Arthur, 1977, in Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981, p.1).

There is a number of reasons for the failure of written feedback to make any significant difference to students’ writing. Not least of these, according to Knoblauch & Brannon (1981), is that students often fail to comprehend the written commentary, and even when they do, they do not always know how to use those responses to improve their writing (1981, p.1). Sommers (1982) offers a further possible explanation by noting that “most teachers’ comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped from text to text” (1982, p.152). Ferris et al (1997) define “text-specific” as “comments which could only have been written on this particular essay, versus ‘generic’ comments which could have appeared on any student paper” (1997, p.167).

Other issues identified by Sommers (1982) to explain the inefficacy of written commentary in improving students’ writing are the tendency for students to surrender their own purposes for writing to the agendas established by teachers and their commentary, and the confusion which arises as teachers give feedback as if drafts are final versions, embedding any comments about meaning in feedback about form, and

making evaluations rather than making suggestions. This use of comments to justify grades rather than to guide revisions is typical of the “judge” role described by Murray (1982b, p.151); a role which casts the teacher as the upholder of rules and institutions, and which, he maintains, perpetuates students’ tendencies to continue breaking rules in writing.

In spite of the negative evidence of the value of written feedback, the solution is not necessarily to discard the use of written feedback, but to adjust the nature of it. As Sommers (1982) suggests, teachers should try to expand their roles when responding to student texts, and they should read early drafts of student writing “as any reader would, registering questions, reflecting befuddlement, and noting places where ... [he/she is] puzzled about the meaning of the text” (1982, p.155). Assuming such a role can help the teacher avoid appropriating student texts and at the same time encourage student writers to revise when their drafts fail to convey their intended meaning or achieve the effect they wish to create.

The non-appropriation of student texts is important given that teacher usurpation of student texts has the undesirable consequence of lowering students’ motivation and incentive to write, with student writers revising just to satisfy the teacher rather than to express and develop their own ideas. Brannon & Knoblauch (1982) warn writing teachers that “we lose more than we gain by preempting their control and allowing our own Ideal Texts to dictate choices properly belonging to the writers” (1982, p.159). Therefore, when giving response to student writing, teachers should try to keep student writers motivated and engaged in the process of communicating and developing their

own ideas rather than making the student writers write in ways which are perceived by the English language teachers as ‘ideal texts’.

Significantly, written commentary, these authors contend, should be firmly located in the context of classroom dialogue, with face-to-face encounters between students and teacher where there is negotiating of meaning. This coincides with Murray’s assertion that teachers need only serve as ‘listeners’ while helping students become effective writers (1982a, p.140).

## **2.2 Impact of L1 on L2 teaching pedagogy**

It has been noted above that practices in L1 writing have considerably shaped the teaching of writing and the nature of feedback. The product-oriented instructional tradition in L1 influenced the writing instruction and teacher response in second language classrooms in the 1960s. Much emphasis was placed on the correctness of sentence structures and linguistic form. As with L1 writing pedagogy, the written product was the focal point of evaluation and concern. Silva (1990, p.12) describes this teaching approach as controlled composition (sometimes referred to as guided composition), which originated from the audio-lingual method. The original assumptions underlying this approach were that language is speech and that spoken language is reflected through the written code. These two assumptions led to the notion that writing serves only to reinforce oral practice and thus plays a secondary role in language learning. This is exemplified by Fries (1945) in his work *Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language*. He considered writing an “afterthought” and addressed writing as “written exercises” which “might be part of the work” of the second



learner (1945, p.8). Rivers (1968) further exemplified writing functions as “the handmaid of the other skills” (listening, speaking, and reading), “which must not take precedence as a major skill to be developed” and must be “considered as a service activity rather than as an end in itself” (1968, p.241, 258).

Pincas (1962), one of the proponents of this approach, was against the use of free composition to extend language control and promote fluency among student writers, who he criticized for having a “naïve traditional view ... in direct opposition to the expressed ideals of scientific habit-forming teaching patterns” (1962, p.185). He claimed that “any free, random, hit-or-miss activity” should be “eliminated wherever possible, so that errors arising from the native-to-target language transfer can be avoided” (1962, p.185).

This early version of the product-oriented, instructional approach, which reflected the dominant behaviourist flavour of education at the time, favoured the practice of applying previously learned, discrete language items by providing students with passages of connected discourse and requiring them to manipulate linguistic forms within these texts (Raimes, 1991, p.408). The tasks assigned to students mainly consisted of combining and substitution exercises designed to facilitate the learning of sentence structures by providing students with “no freedom to make mistakes” (Pincas, 1962, p.91). A consensus emerged that “composing writing beyond the sentence – must be guided or controlled” (Slager, 1966, p.77). Writing was rigidly controlled through guided compositions where learners were given short texts for filling in gaps, completing sentences, and transforming tenses or personal pronouns (Hyland, 2003, p.4). Given

these beliefs, it was clear that the focus of teachers' feedback on student writing was to facilitate students' production of well-formed sentences that were free from grammatical and lexical errors.

### ***2.2.1 Current traditional rhetoric***

In the mid-sixties, there was an increasing awareness among writing experts of the need for L2 writers to produce extended written work, due to the realization that controlled composition which focuses on helping students to build grammatical sentences was inadequate. The term, "current traditional rhetoric", was used to describe the writing approach which combines the basic principles of the traditional paradigm from native-speaker composition instruction with Kaplan's theory of contrastive rhetoric in the mid-sixties (Silva, 1990, p.13). Some of the overt features and characteristics of the "current traditional paradigm" as cited by Young (1978) include

the emphasis on the composed product rather than the composing process;  
the analysis of discourse into words, sentences and paragraphs; the  
classification of discourse into description, narration, exposition, and  
argument; the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation) and  
with style (economy, clarity, emphasis)

(Young, 1978, p.31)

The concept of contrastive rhetoric is defined by Kaplan (1966) as "the method of organizing syntactic units into larger patterns", that is, the organizational structure of written discourse (1966, p.4). He observed that ESL writers often "employ a rhetoric

and a sequence of thought which violate the expectations of the native reader (1966, p.4). Therefore, to avoid the influence of the first language extending beyond the sentence level, he recommended that there should be “more pattern drill ... at the rhetorical level rather than at the syntactic level” and that the necessity “to provide the student with a form within which he [sic] may operate” was also called for (1967, p.15; 1966, p.20). This writing approach was in fact a specific and widespread example of the application of behaviourist views of learning and writing in L2 at the time these researchers were writing. However, it is an advance on “guided composition” in that it addresses large chunks of text, discourse in fact, rather than focusing only on sentence level patterns. Yet it still does not accommodate the actual process of writing.

To provide a clearer understanding of this traditional paradigm, Hairston (1982) highlights three main assumptions in relation to this approach. The first assumption is that competent writers know in advance what they are going to say before they even start to write. Therefore, the best way to help students learn writing is to provide texts for them and make them manipulate linguistic forms within that text. A second assumption is that its adherents believe that the composing process is linear, meaning student writers can proceed systematically and smoothly from prewriting to writing to rewriting with few problems. The third assumption is that editing is teaching writing (Hairston, 1982, p.78). This is based on the notion that proofreading and editing are the chief skills in revising one’s paper (Hairston, 1982, p.80). This belief is prevalent among writing teachers who have little understanding of what it means to make substantial revision in their students’ work other than focusing on the teaching of style,

organization, and grammatical accuracy. Therefore, teacher evaluations of student texts are based on their clarity and conformity to prescribed patterns rather than on the students' creativity and originality.

So while this view of writing is a move away from the belief that writing is spoken language in written form, the emphasis is still on the end product, and not on the processes which occur to create the product.

### ***2.2.2 The process approach in the 1980s***

Zamel (1985) is one of the most articulate advocates of allowing the insights of L1 research to guide research and pedagogy in L2 writing, particularly regarding the uptake of process-writing approaches. She urges L2 writing teachers to recognise the complexity of the composing process as it entails several stages such as “rehearsing”, “drafting”, and “revising”, as also suggested by Murray (1980, p.4-5). Similarly she urged against prescription, echoing the thoughts of Witte & Faigley (1981) that the nature of writing “mitigates against prescriptive approaches to the teaching of writing” (1981, p.202). For instance, in one of Zamel’s studies (1985), she attempted to analyse the responding behaviors of 15 ESL teachers. She found that the response behavior of these teachers was not much different from their L1 predecessors, and claimed that they often

misread student texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, write contradictory comments, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final

products, and rarely make content-specific comments or offer specific strategies for revising the text.

(Zamel, 1985, p.86)

Zamel (1985) argued that ESL writing teachers, when providing feedback on student writing, should avoid focusing students' attention on the surface features of errors but instead encourage them to write multiple drafts. Instead of assuming the role of an examiner or judge, writing teachers should provide constructive feedback between drafts and during the writing process. They should give feedback on content only on early drafts, and form-based feedback at the end of the process. Teachers should also try to utilise teacher-student conferences and peer-response to maximise teaching effectiveness (Zamel, 1985, p.96-97).

As to error correction and grammar instruction in the L2 writing context, Krashen (1984) and Zamel (1985) have both argued that these should be limited to the final stage of the composing process. According to Krashen (1984), the over-teaching of grammar rules for editing purposes can seriously interfere with the composing process (1984, p.34). Zamel (1985) also commented that the responding practices of ESL writing teachers are similar to that of their L1 counterparts, with writing teachers often viewing themselves more as language teachers than writing teachers. They can be distracted by the surface errors in student writing and read and react to students' texts as a series of separate sentences or clauses, rather than as a whole unit of discourse (Zamel, 1985, p.86). In this way, they tend to overlook the more important meaning-related problems in students' texts.

The above writers, then, not only make a case for only addressing form in the final stage of writing, but open to question an excessive role for surface error correction as a tool for improving students' syntactic knowledge and use of language. Sommers (1982) does not reject the benefit of feedback on form, but continues the case for separating the feedback on these surface forms and the underlying meaning. She claimed that if writing teachers attend to both minor infelicities such as problems on word choice, punctuation, sentence structure, or style, and larger issues on rhetoric and content such as elaboration of ideas or making the thoughts more appealing to the readers in the same version of a text, contradictory feedback may be provided to the student writers. This is produced when first, writing teachers provide interlinear comments addressing the text as a finished product to be edited, and second, when they give marginal comments that view the text as still developing and evolving (Sommers 1982, p.151). Students who receive mixed messages of this kind may be confused because they have no way of knowing whether to focus on the meaning-level changes suggested or the local problems pinpointed. They may also question the value of making surface-level changes to their writing if they know that the ideas in their writing have to be substantively revised anyway.

Besides, the argument continues, if the student writers are required to deal with so many remedial tasks at the same time, they may find these too daunting and may just give up altogether. This violates the basic educational principle that people should solve large problems, that is, text revision and improvement, by doing smaller, manageable tasks at a time (Hairston, 1986, p.120). This strongly implies that feedback and revision

should occur in stages, not in one go, with attention to meaning and then to form occurring at different points in the writing process.

However, there are arguments claiming that L2 writers are so different from native speakers that there is the need for careful consideration of the appropriateness of each of the pedagogical techniques advanced by L1 writing experts before implementing them in second language classrooms. This argument is developed more fully in the next section.

### ***2.2.3 Limitations in L1 and L2 links***

Horowitz (1986) pointed out that many ESL writers have very real needs to succeed in L2 academic settings: “Many of our students, for better or for worse, have been highly conditioned by the demands of their native systems to see THE TEST or THE PAPER or, most of all, THE GRADE, as the be-all and end-all of the educational process” (Horowitz, 1986, p.143). Therefore, process approaches that teach “students to write and revise according to the demands of an audience” are useless unless those demands are realistic simulations of academic standards” (Horowitz, 1986, p.142). This argument focuses more on the learners’ purposes for learning L2 than any actual differences in the learning per se. Horowitz (1986) fails to address whether L2 learners benefit from attention to the processes of writing as well as L1 learners. However, other writers do address the learning differences.

With a focus on actual learning differences in L1 and L2, Johns (1995) maintains that writing instructions that fail to address the linguistic gaps of L2 writers, and their

need to learn to write in a second language is “cruelly unfair to diverse students” (1995, p.182). Furthermore, in three articles (1988, 1993, 1997), Silva challenged the implicit assumption that L1 and L2 student writers are fundamentally the same. In the earliest piece, a response to a 1987 research review by Zamel on writing pedagogy, Silva criticised Raimes (1985), one of the reviewed authors, for failing to recognise the differences between L1 and L2 and for having a “tacit assumption here that L1 and L2 writing are essentially the same phenomenon – that the linguistic, cultural, and experiential differences of L2 writers are of negligible or no concern to ESL composition teachers” (Silva, 1988, p.517). This is despite the fact that most ESL composition teachers and L2 writers, including Raimes, are aware that “all of us who have tried to write something in a second language ... sense that the process of writing in an L2 is startlingly different from writing in our L1” (1985, p.232). Silva (1988) suggests that “Although there is certainly much to be learned from developments in L1 composition theory, research, and practice, it seems wise to interpret these lessons very carefully into L2 writing contexts” (Silva, 1988, p.517).

In his 1993 article, Silva, after reviewing 72 L2 writing studies, concluded that there are “a number of salient differences between L1 and L2 writing with regard to both composing processes ... and features of written texts” (Silva, 1993, p.657). Finally, Silva argued that because of the fundamentally distinct nature of L2 writing, “respect” for ESL student writers requires that they be (a) understood, (b) placed in suitable learning contexts, (c) provided with appropriate instruction, and (d) evaluated fairly (1997, p.359).



Other writing experts (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990, and Zhang, 1995) have also highlighted the potential problems of adopting L1 writing pedagogy in the second language writing classroom. Goldstein & Conrad (1990, p.459) pointed out that cross-cultural differences may affect the nature and outcomes of one-to-one writing conferences as ESL students bring with them diverse cultures and languages.

With the more prevalent adoption of the process-oriented approach in the teaching of writing in the 1990s, research conducted during this time showed that feedback was more comprehensive. Ferris (1995, p.47), for example, reported that L2 writing teachers were increasingly providing feedback on different aspects of student writing such as content and organization. A case study by Conrad & Goldstein (1999) studying the relationship between types of revision and revision success identified a wide variety of issues addressed by the writing teacher for student revision. These included coherence/cohesion, paragraphing, content, purpose, lexical choice, and “development”; an example is the teacher asking the students to add examples, facts or details, explicitness, and depth in their written piece (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999, Table 6, p.159). Although this marked a change in teacher response to student writing, the question as to whether simultaneous attention be given to both content and form or whether feedback be given to content followed by form, as advocated by the L1 writing experts, remained controversial. This was followed up in a study by Ashwell (2000).

Ashwell (2000) studied different patterns of teacher feedback given to foreign language students producing a first draft, a second draft, and a final version. The first pattern was given content-focused feedback on draft 1 followed by form-focused feedback on

draft 2; the second pattern received form-focused feedback on draft 1 and content-focused feedback on draft 2; the third pattern was that form-focused feedback and content-focused feedback were provided for both draft 1 and draft 2; while the control pattern received no feedback at all (2000, p.243). The results showed that the recommended pattern of content-focused feedback followed by form-focused feedback did not produce significantly different results in terms of gains in formal accuracy or content between draft 1 and draft 3 from the other patterns. Moreover, L2 students were not inhibited to make improvements to their writing even when feedback was given on content and form simultaneously.

Further evidence on this point comes from Fathman & Whalley (1990), who conducted a study on 72 L2 students from mixed language backgrounds, primarily Asian and Hispanic. Students were randomly assigned to four groups with students in each group receiving a different kind of teacher feedback on their composition: Group 1 received no feedback, Group 2 received grammar feedback only, Group 3 received content feedback only, and Group 4 received grammar and content feedback. They were required to write a story about a sequence of eight pictures and then were required to rewrite their compositions based on the feedback from their teacher. This study revealed that student writers who were provided with grammar and content feedback simultaneously were able to make greater improvements in their rewrites than students in the other three groups. It was also concluded that teacher feedback on both content and grammar simultaneously “does not negatively affect the content of writing”, and that “students can improve their writing in situations where content and form are given

simultaneously” (Fathman & Whalley, 1990, p.186). So the findings of Fathman & Whalley (1990) match those of Ferris (1997) who claims that providing teacher feedback on both content and form “does not short-circuit students’ ability to revise their ideas, but may improve their end product ... because they receive more accuracy-oriented feedback throughout the writing process” (1997, p.333). The conclusion drawn was that teachers should not necessarily assign multiple drafts that separate revision and editing stages. In fact, postponing error feedback until the final stage of the composing process may deprive the L2 student writers the opportunity to acquire the necessary linguistic input they desperately need.

Reid (1994, p.288), Ferris et al (1997, p.177), and Conrad & Goldstein (1999, p.173) also argue against the separation of form and content in L2 as they believe that teacher feedback should cater to the most critical needs of individual students during the composing process. Because the writing abilities and needs of individual students may vary, it seems unreasonable for students who have no problems with their development of ideas in writing to be denied form-focused feedback just because they are working on their first drafts. In the same manner, student writers who encounter a number of linguistic problems may obscure the ideas they want to convey. It may then be necessary for the writing teacher to provide these students with the linguistic help they most critically need, that is, to clarify their ideas before constructive content comments are given. Therefore, to ignore the help that student writers need at the most critical time just because it is not the “time” to do so seems to be inappropriate and unhelpful.

#### ***2.2.4 Explanation for differences in L1 and L2 research findings regarding writing***

There are two main reasons offered for the divergence of L2 findings from L1 composition research. One is that L2 student writers are well aware that their linguistic inadequacy may impede their communication of ideas, and thus they are more motivated to address their grammatical problems in their writing than their L1 counterparts (Ferris, 1995, p.47, and Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, p.152).

The other reason is that the distinction between form and content which we have seen was important in L1 may not be applicable in L2. Ferris (1997) commented that the separation of form and content is “a false dichotomy” given that “content” determines “form” (1997, p.333). A faulty form may result in obscuring the meaning that the student writer would like to convey to the reader. Therefore, to separate form and content arbitrarily and to dictate to teachers the types of comments they are required to give to students at various stages of the writing process may not help student writers improve their writing performance.

Silva (1993) claims that for English language teachers to deal effectively with L2 writers, it is essential for them to acquire a clear understanding of the distinct nature of L2 writing (1993, p.657), even though he doesn't want to “ignore, deny, or trivialize the many important similarities between L1 and L2 writing” (1993, p.660). Rather, the purpose of his highlighting the differences between L1 and L2 writing stems from the belief that an understanding of the differences between L1 and L2 can enable English language teachers to better comprehend and address the special needs of L2 writers (Silva, 1993, p.660).

The findings of Silva's study (1993) indicated a number of salient differences between L1 and L2 writing with regard to both composing processes (and sub-processes: planning, transcribing and reviewing) and features of written texts (fluency, accuracy, quality, and structure). At the strategic level, it was found that the general composing process patterns are similar in L1 and L2. However, L2 writers composed less effectively than L1 writers in that L2 writers did less planning (global and local) and demonstrated more difficulty in setting goals, generating and organizing material. Their transcribing was more laborious and less productive than L1 writers due to the lack of lexical resources. They were less able to review, reread and reflect on their writing than their L1 counterparts (Silva, 1993, p.668).

At the discourse level, L2 writers tended to write fewer words. There were more grammatical errors in their writing and the holistic scores for their writing tended to be lower than that of the L1 writers. At the linguistic level, the texts of L2 writers were stylistically distinct and simpler in structure than the L1 student writers. There was the use of more coordination, less subordination, less noun modification, and less passivisation. They demonstrated distinct patterns in the use of cohesive devices, such as the use of more conjunctives, and fewer lexical ties (Silva, 1993, p.668).

Overall, Silva (1993) urges English language teachers to be aware that "L2 writing is strategically, rhetorically and linguistically different in important ways from L1 writing" (1993, p.669).

Given the work of L2 researchers on writing and the varied needs of L2 writers, in any uptake of process writing, a cautious attitude about any arbitrary separation of feedback on content and form seems advisable, with a case to be made for more individualistic responses which recognise the particular needs of particular students.

### **2.3 Official uptake of the process-oriented approach to the teaching of writing in Hong Kong English programmes**

Officially at least, the teaching and responding to writing in Hong Kong second language classrooms reflect pedagogies consistent with the above process approach. The *Syllabuses for Secondary schools: English Language (Secondary 1-5, 1999)* and *English Language: Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6, 2007)*, are the two language documents which theoretically shape the English curriculum in Hong Kong. In these two documents, advice has been given to English language teachers about writing instruction, focus of feedback, error correction and written commentary.

In the *Syllabuses for Secondary schools: English Language (Secondary 1-5, 1999)*, it is implicitly suggested that a process approach be adopted for the teaching of writing. The document states that “writing is important in that it engages students in a process which constantly requires them to take in information and generate thoughts, to organize and reorganize ideas, and to discover and recreate meaning” (1999, p.84). The adoption of a process approach is again mentioned in the later section of the document where teachers are reminded that they should avoid “adopting solely traditional product-based approaches writing which are mainly preoccupied with the

teaching of form and use, with the finished product seen as a display of learners' ability in accurately manipulating, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics, such as spelling, punctuation and handwriting" (1999, p.95) and will not help in improving the students' writing abilities.

Similar advice is also given in the subsequent official document *English Language: Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 – 6, 2007)*. It is explicitly stated in this document that "a process approach to writing is recommended" (2007, p.83) and there is further elaboration of what this involves. This approach "focuses on learners exploring and being aware of what they do, and the choices they make, during writing" (2007, p.83).

As for the roles of the teacher, it is recommended in the above mentioned official documents that teachers should conduct teacher-learner conferencing with the students. The prerequisites of conducting teacher-student conferencing are given in the syllabus: "Teachers need to create a trusting environment in which learners feel comfortable talking about their writing with teachers. Teachers should not be viewed by learners as ones who criticize them, but ones who will provide encouragement and help them improve their proficiency" (1999, p.93). In the curriculum and assessment guidelines, the actual activities to be conducted in teacher-student conferencing are suggested: "The teacher conducts a conference with learners individually or in small groups to discuss their drafts. Learners can participate actively in negotiating and clarifying meaning before proceeding to revise their work" (2007, p.86).

As for the focus of feedback, teachers are advised in the syllabus to avoid providing detailed editing comments on the surface form without paying attention to organization and content issues (1999, p.95) as these are not effective means to help students to become more effective writers.

Regarding error correction, the syllabus recommends that comprehensive checking of student errors should be avoided as this can have a negative effect on the psychological well-being of the student writer: “Teachers need not correct all the mistakes in learners’ work. Total correction is time-consuming for the teacher and discouraging for the learners, particularly when the latter see their papers full of red ink” (1999, p.84). In addition, teachers should also “indicate mistakes so that learners can correct them” with the use of the “list of editing symbols supplied by the teacher” (1999, p.96).

As for the giving of commentary, English language teachers are reminded in the syllabus that they need to identify the strengths and weaknesses in students’ texts: “It is important that when evaluating a piece of learner writing, teachers do not just indicate its weaknesses but its strengths as well” (1999, p.96). In addition, the *English Language: Curriculum and Assessment Guide* (2007) suggests that words of encouragement should be given in areas where students have done well: “When giving comments, teachers should offer positive support by praising what learners have done well in their drafts” (2007, p.86).

Of course, as outlined above, if a process approach to writing is upheld, it should impact on the way in which teachers view feedback; what it means and how it should be given.



Yet an analysis of the way in which feedback is handled in Hong Kong schools suggests that there is a mismatch, as suggested in the *Introduction*, between policy directives and school practices, that is, what is proposed in documents and what actually occurs in classrooms. In fact, many teachers in Hong Kong still adhere to the practice of correcting every grammatical error in students' writing, which potentially obstructs students' development as writers, given that such practice may not only be discouraging to these students but will almost inevitably encourage students to focus their attention on surface-level errors at the expense of ideas.

## **2.4 Nature and attitudes about feedback in Hong Kong**

Although there has been little by way of official auditing of teacher practices regarding the giving of feedback on writing in the Hong Kong context, most people who are connected with schools would declare anecdotally that teachers rely on written feedback about surface level grammatical or lexical features. This was reinforced by the study conducted by Lee (2004), who used questionnaires followed by telephone interviews to find out teachers' perspectives regarding error correction in Hong Kong. A total of 206 English teachers filled out the questionnaires and 19 of them participated in the follow-up interviews. The error correction task was administered to 58 teachers after they had completed the questionnaires. Each teacher was asked to mark a student essay in the way they normally did in their own marking situation.

### **2.4.1 Teacher preferences in giving feedback**

Lee's study (2004) found that the error correction practices among teachers generally did not correspond to the recommended principles as recommended in the official

documents previously discussed. Teachers preferred comprehensive error feedback, giving either direct or indirect feedback.

Specifically, findings of Lee's study (2004) revealed that the majority of the teachers (72%) who filled out the questionnaires (irrespective of the form level [s] they were teaching) said that they adopted a comprehensive approach in the marking of student errors (2004, p.293).

Moreover, it is interesting to see that even the teachers who said they practiced selective marking in the checking of students' work tended to check a large number of student errors. In short, they are 'selecting' much of the work anyway for correction. Among the teachers who claimed that they marked errors selectively, 88% of them said that they marked two-thirds or more of errors in student writing selected on an ad hoc basis (2004, p.293). This study revealed that teachers seemed to have little understanding of how their marking of student errors might contribute to the long-term development of student writing as the reasons they gave for adopting a comprehensive marking approach (complying with students' preferences and their responsibility to do so) and the selective marking of errors were not based on any sound educational principles (2004, p.293).

However, the usefulness of comprehensive checking of errors is questioned by writing experts such as Zamel (1985) who pointed out that teachers of writing tend to view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers, with the undesirable consequence of distracting students from other more important concerns in writing instruction (1985, p.86).

As for the error correction strategies adopted, 36% of the teachers claimed that they adopted direct error feedback, while 43% often or always used indirect coded feedback. These were two of the main error correction strategies adopted. Teachers' preference for direct feedback and indirect coded feedback was revealed in the self-reported questionnaire and this was supported by the findings in the error correction task. All teachers who took part in the error correction tasks adopted either direct error feedback (correct forms or structures provided) or indirect coded feedback (direct location of errors plus the use of error codes to indicate the type of errors made) (2004, p.294). In spite of the heavy use of direct feedback, Allwright (1975) & Long (1977) point out that teachers should avoid using overt correction (direct correction) as this encourages a passive and unquestioning acceptance of the teacher's comments. As a result, learners become reliant on teachers and may not be able to develop their independent editing skills in the long run. Therefore, comprehensive checking of student errors is not only time consuming for the teachers but may lead to students' over-reliance on direct feedback from the teacher. We will return to this issue in a later section about students' perceptions of whose responsibility error correction is.

#### ***2.4.2 Student inability to respond effectively to indirect feedback***

Another finding worth discussing in Lee's study (2004) relates to how well students respond to certain types of feedback. The teacher questionnaire data revealed that the large majority of teachers surveyed (87%) reported that they used error codes in marking student writing. Significantly, these same teachers in interviews mentioned that students had difficulties in correcting their errors based on the codes provided for them as students

had limited understanding of grammatical terms commonly used in a correction code, and that they correct surface errors better than meaning errors (2004, p.295).

At the same time, student questionnaires in the study revealed that 60% of the students involved in the study received indirect feedback. Indirect feedback means informing students of the location of errors by underlining or circling them or prompting them about the nature of the errors made. Two kinds of feedback which are subsumed under indirect feedback are “coded feedback” and “uncoded feedback”. Coded feedback refers to situations where the type of error made is indicated such as “tense” or “spelling” whereas uncoded feedback occurs when the writing teachers just circle or underline and the student writer is left to diagnose and find solutions to the problem (Ferris, 2002, p.20). The majority of the students who participated in the survey, claimed that their teachers used error codes to indicate error types for them with 76% expressing preference for the use of error codes to facilitate error identification. However, less than 50% of the students surveyed said that they could correct half to three-quarters of their errors due to the fact they were unclear about the grammar concepts involved. One student remarked: “I don’t have clear concepts of the parts of speech. I know the codes, but I’m not clear about the grammar” (2004, p.296-297).

Lalande (1982) found that students who received indirect error feedback were better able to make more improvements in writing than those who received direct error feedback or overt correction (1982, p.147). However, the adoption of indirect feedback strategies with the use of codes has to be handled with care as there is the prior assumption that learners have a good understanding of the metalanguage and

concepts in relation to the grammatical terms used in the correct code. Findings in Berry's research (1995) on language teaching and metalanguage have indicated a big gap between teachers' and students' knowledge of metalinguistic terms. If the study finds that students' knowledge of grammatical terminology in relation to errors is weak, the effectiveness of the correction code as a means of error feedback is called into question. This difficulty is in relation to out-and-out errors of form. If that is difficult for students, it is only reasonable to assume that corrections or adaptations related to ideas and meaning will similarly be an obstacle for students as they grapple with teacher notes on their work, assuming it is ever even provided. The inability of students to effectively make use of meaning-related feedback, which is recommended in syllabus documents as outlined above, is understandable as meaning errors fall into the category of 'comprehending' and in order to make a correction, the writer/reader has to detect something wrong with the meaning of the text. Errors of comprehension often "require a writer/reader to process more than a sentence of text; that is, they are usually super-sentential" (Hull, 1987, p.12). To correct meaning errors, text processing skills of a higher order are required. It is, therefore, not difficult to explain why meaning errors are more difficult to fix than surface errors. It is the time when students most need the help of teachers for further explanation and clarification and the written feedback provided for students may not be adequate to address their needs and concerns.

#### ***2.4.3 Correction: teacher or student responsibility?***

When students were asked by Lee who they think should be responsible for error correction, almost half of the students (45%) thought that it was their teacher's job to

locate and correct errors for students (2004, p.300). During the interview, when students were asked whether it was the teacher's responsibility or the students' responsibility to correct errors, a majority of students replied that it was the teacher's responsibility. Students gave various reasons such as that students are too lazy, and teachers being more competent than the students in error correction. From the students' perspective, since teachers can do error correction better, they should then do the job. As one student remarked, "I don't think I can locate the mistakes. The teacher's responsibility is greater. Since my proofreading is not good, I think teachers should locate the mistakes for me" (Lee, 2004, p.300). These perceptions reflect the general culture of teaching and learning in Hong Kong, as outlined in the Introduction; a culture where teachers are seen as having primary responsibility to tell students what it is that they need to know.

In a similar vein, when responding to the problem of students having difficulties with the use of the error codes to revise their texts, one teacher in Lee's study said it would be better for the teacher to correct the errors for the students instead of making them seek individual help. As she reported, "When students don't understand the codes, they come to ask me individually. I'd rather correct the errors for them because I don't want all of them to come out and ask for the corrections" (2004, p.295). The unwillingness of teachers to give individual help to students is a cause of concern as it seems to suggest that the teacher respondents generally adopt a decontextualised approach in response to student writing and are not prepared to build relationships with the students to have a better understanding of their problems and needs, as the process approach advocates.

#### ***2.4.4 Perceived impact of current error correction practices***

With regard to teachers' evaluation of their error correction practices in the questionnaire survey, over half of the teachers (61%) thought their error correction practices brought about some student progress in accuracy with only 9%, however, reporting that they thought their students were making good progress. Only a very small number of teachers thought that the main purpose of error correction was to help students locate errors, to encourage them to reflect on those errors, and to promote self-learning (Lee, 2004, p.299-230). This indifferent attitude of English language teachers in Hong Kong is worrying as teachers have not taken appropriate measures to help solve students' problems in their writing. Teachers' readiness to adopt a direct error feedback strategy to comply with students' request is really ironical because it should be the students who should be given more opportunities to acquire the editing skills through practising and not the teachers who are supposed to have already mastered the writing skills.

Regarding the limitations of written-only feedback, Arndt suggested that certain aspects of texts could only be adequately addressed in face-to-face conferences: "... minor points of language or style could be cleared up by means of a written comment, but major points relating to meaning and organization needed to be clarified, explained, and negotiated through discussion and dialogue" (1993, p.100). The use of teacher-student conferencing as another mode of feedback can be used, as both teachers and students tend to be positive about the opportunities that conferences can offer and research suggests that students typically receive more focused and usable comments than through

written feedback (Zamel, 1985). Conrad and Goldstein (1999), in their case study, recommend that when revision problems are of a more global, abstract nature, they are best dealt with through face-to-face discussions between the teacher and the student rather than through written commentary (1999, p.173).

The attitude of students reflected in the questionnaire, as described above, is a cause for concern as motivation to learn a second language is conceived by Gardner (1979) as “a combination of a positive attitude (desire) to learn the language and effort expended in that direction” (1979, p.205). Belcher & Liu (2004) suggest that students who relinquish power to their teachers would like to be told rather than take the initiative to direct their own learning (2004, p.5). With low motivation, students are less likely to take teacher feedback seriously (Lee, 2008, p.157). This has a detrimental effect on the development of student writing ability. Regarding this, Walker & Elias (1987) commented that if only written feedback is provided for the students, then “the interaction between teacher and students stops there” (1987, p.266), whereas a writing conference can provide a setting “for the development of a student’s ability to reflect critically on his or her own work, the content, and the cognitive processes involved in producing the writing” (1987, p.267).

The above discussion on the state of play regarding practices and attitudes about feedback in Hong Kong highlights the need for alternative modes and purposes of feedback. This study will examine whether this need can be met by including teacher-student conferences as part of the feedback repertoire. The following section will examine underpinning theory and findings regarding the use of teacher-student conferencing in both L1 and L2 as an alternative form of feedback on student writing.



## **2.5 Overview of teacher-student conferencing**

The research about teacher-student conferencing would suggest that this form of feedback is a useful addition to teaching and learning of writing in a second language programme. In the literature, feedback sessions between the teacher and the student have been recommended as avenues for clarification of meaning, through teacher-student interaction, and are vital for writing development (e.g., Calkins, 1986, Carnicelli, 1980, Gere & Stevens, 1985, Murray, 1985, and Zamel, 1982). Teacher-student conferencing, a form of meeting between teacher and student where the teacher can provide student writer(s) with verbal feedback through a face-to-face encounter, stands on firm theoretical ground. Some of that ground will be covered in this section, with attention to descriptions and definitions, underpinning theories and studies outlining the contributions and/or pitfalls of conferencing in L1 and L2 teaching and learning.

### ***2.5.1 Defining teacher-student conferencing***

As writing conferences originated in the US, much of the research on conferencing has been conducted in the L1 context (Carnicelli, 1980, Graves, 1983, and Murray, 1985). Graves (1983) commented that the writing conference is a conversation between writer and reader about a piece of work in progress, which looks simple on the outside and yet, he maintains is highly complex (1983, p.190). In short, there needs to be some sort of protocol for conducting feedback within conferences. Bowen (1993), for example, suggests a number of guidelines for conferences to be conducted, such as the writer is expected to speak first, teachers should keep conferences focused and ask questions in relation to the meaning of the text and the writer's intentions (1993, p.192). He

considers it more important to develop students' metacognitive awareness (the highest level of thought processes) rather than be distracted by surface-level errors. All these could be useful guidelines for conference teaching. However, more important is what is really going on in the real discourse of writing conferences. Newkirk (1995) suggested that the teacher's working with the student and their interacting with one another can increase student engagement and participation that could result in improvement of writing (1995, p.195). By looking at the interaction patterns, discourse strategies, and the roles of teacher and student during the conference, it can easily be observed that conference discourse is marked with dynamics; what is going on with the participants cannot be fully anticipated, as "the cross purposes, the resistances, the concealed feelings and attitudes — the unsaid and unsayable are surely a part of writing conferences" (Newkirk, 1995, p.195).

The social context profoundly affects writing development. Newkirk (1989) explores the notion of ownership in the social process which involves interaction between the writer and the reader: "To a degree, the student owns his or her paper, but the paper is intended for others ... [and] ... to a degree, the writing is also owned by its readers. There is a constant interplay between audience and intention" (1989, p.329). The interaction of the writer and the reader plays a part in this social process. For example, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) comment that in the social context of the classroom, teacher-student interactions, which mirror student with wider world interactions, play a crucial role in the development of students' writing ability as the teacher, playing the role of a reader, may influence the way the writer writes (1996, p.380). Students are

provided with the opportunity to negotiate “their real intentions to communicate with real audience expectations” (1996, p.389). Therefore, for example, in the case of academic writing, there is the need to sensitise students to the awareness of audience to meet the expectations of the academic discourse community, leading to more effective academic writing. Providing students with a real audience is, therefore, essential in this social process, with teachers taking on the role of intermediate audience to prepare students for their real audience.

So, then, conferencing is a highly interactive process within which students potentially become more socialised into writing practices.

### ***2.5.2 Theoretical underpinnings***

The focus on interaction in conferencing is a strong indicator of a major underpinning theory, social constructivism. In fact, teacher-student conferencing is an exemplification of the social constructivist theory whereby the teacher interacts with the student writer in the reconstruction of the current draft through face-to-face interaction. In composition theory, social constructivist theory was introduced through the work of Bruffee (1986). He claimed that language is “social” in nature and people are inter-related to one another through the sharing of meaning, communication, and knowledge which they mutually construct. A writer who is writing on his or her own is connected to others because of the consideration of an audience for whom the writer is writing. In other words, a writer is always a part of society, connected by language with others in the society through a network of shared ideas expressed through language. As Bruffee

(1986) explained, “We use language primarily to join communities we do not yet belong to and to cement our membership in communities we already belong to” (1986, p.784).

Social constructivists hold the view that language and learning occur through interaction with society. Vygotsky (1978, p.85) explained that students have two levels of language development. The first is the “actual developmental level”, which is the level in which they can work without assistance. However, they also have a second level, the level of potential development; which is the level in which they could work with the help of a teacher to help them go beyond what they can currently do. Vygotsky (1978) called the space between these two levels the ‘zone of proximal development’ and defined it as:

... the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

(Vygotsky, 1978, p.85)

In this process, the teacher plays the role of an experienced writer who can offer support to students to help them progress. From a Vygotskian point of view, it is the collaboration between teacher and student that helps foster the language development of student writers. In this way, teacher-student conferencing can be seen as a tool for realising the potential of zone of proximal development.

Sperling (1991) continues the argument for a social perspective on conferencing with the notion that the construction of written language in writing conferences should be expanded from cognitive development to social development. She believes that the private teacher-student talk in writing conferences is “the variable social drama of the composing process” (1991, p.132). In her investigation with 3 ninth-grade students, she found that the fleeting moment of talk had not only the effect of confirming a student’s original plan in writing but also that it was the conversational context that contributed to critical thought processes which are unique and vital to the process of composing.

Barnes (1990) extended the theoretical understanding of the ‘talk’ element of conferences with his belief on the connections between spoken and written language, and using one to enhance the other. His theory on talk and writing is based on the premise that students “have already taken possession of complex ways of making sense of the world ... for the social and cognitive skills they have developed in various contexts in and out of school provide their most valuable resources as learners” (Barnes, 1990, p.54). He claimed that students have more experience as talkers than as readers or writers, and suggested the mobilisation of their experience to serve the learning of writing. He saw teacher-student conferencing as beneficial, since the one-to-one conferencing between teacher and student is both an internal and external act, as the student writer is performing an internal act of reflective dialogue and at the same time engaging in an external act with the teacher to clarify textual meaning. The communication of writing with the reader, both the intended audience and the teacher as a representative of that audience, is a social activity involving interactions among members of a discourse

community. In this way, teacher-student conferencing can be regarded as a type of collaborative, or social, learning in which the student writer is afforded the experience of having a real reader giving responses to his or her own writing, while the teacher helps develop a draft through probing and supporting the writer in revising the draft and evaluating decisions. Many of the supposed benefits of teacher-student conferencing are linked to this interactive quality in the teaching-learning process.

### ***2.5.3 Benefits of conferencing***

Rose (1982) commented that writing conferences are of mutual benefit to both students and teacher because a meeting on a one-to-one basis between student and teacher provides the latter with the opportunity to push the former into thinking more deeply in discussions (1982, p.326). Assuming the role of an interested reader, the teacher makes the student realise the need to be able to explain and put across his or her own ideas to another person. Similarly, the teacher, as a reader and a critic, can also benefit from the conference in the sense that the teacher can gauge the student's understanding of comments, thereby making himself or herself understood more fully. Rose's views coincided with those of Carnicelli (1980) who also expressed support for the conference method as being more effective in providing feedback on writing because of the interactive quality:

... all the forms have the same essential features: only two parties, a teacher and a student, not a teacher and a class. The conversation between these two parties, rather than statements or written comments by only one, is the strength of the conference method.

(Carnicelli, 1980, p.101)

His rationale in support of the conference method is that the individual nature of a teacher-student conference can offer student writers a deep sense of security; the amount of feedback provided in a teacher-student conference is often greater than an equal amount of time spent on written commentary; and the two-way communication between teacher and student in a conference can offer opportunities for clarification and negotiation and promote self-learning among student writers as they are required to take an active role in the communication process (Carnicelli, 1980, p.105-111). Echoing Carnicelli's views, Bowen (1993) also suggests that "effective conferences are characterized by reversible role relationships" (1993, p.191) and that teacher-student conference sessions can "provide the opportunity to discuss both process and product" (1993, p.191) and provide the impetus for the writer to reflect on his/her writing process, including adjusting content according to the audience and purpose of writing. This process of reflection can not only help the writer improve the text as a product itself, but can also raise his/her awareness in the writing process, an awareness which is conducive to the development of the student as an effective writer.

McAndrew & Reigstad (2001) also commented that teacher-student conferencing is a form by which the teacher plays the role of a caring tutor who is ready to work with the student writer towards a common goal (2001, p.7). A student writer who spends time talking to a tutor may experience the feeling of being cared for. As the teacher encourages and gives responses in each session, the student grows and develops an individual voice as a writer. The encouragement and support given to the student writers in the process of writing can ultimately lead to the ongoing literary growth of the writer.

Working with the teacher face-to-face can provide an avenue for meeting a real and immediate audience. The work of Barnes (1990) regarding the teacher as a representative of the discourse community has already been noted. Sperling (1990) continues this theme by recognising the role of the teacher as a mediator and communicator of the target culture, community norms of interpreting and constructing discourse, and rules of interaction.

Though empirical evidence on the effects of writing conferences is extremely limited especially with regard to L2 writers (Ferris, 2003, p.40), it seems uncontroversial to suggest, based on the outline above, that teacher-student conferences are an effective means of providing teacher feedback to students. Some teachers have even commented that teaching by conference is even better than instructional practice in the classroom. All conferences are not equal, however, and these benefits are contingent on conferences being conducted in a certain way.

#### ***2.5.4 Format and qualities of successful conferences***

A number of studies have identified differences between successful and unsuccessful conferences. In a study by Walker & Elias (1987) on the teacher-student reflections on writing conferences and their level of satisfaction with their work, it was found that the focus of successful conferences was on the students and their work and not the tutor and his or her agenda. The low-rated conferences were dominated by the tutor and contained repeated requests for explanations, either by the tutor or student or both. Walker & Elias (1987) hypothesized that



the most successful conferences would be those in which students participated most actively (talked most) and, in the best conferences, the agenda would be evaluation of the students' work: tutors evaluating students' work and students practicing evaluating, that is, learning how to reflect on and critically assess their work

(Walker & Elias, 1987, p.268)

They further commented that successful conferences provided students with the opportunities to reflect critically on their written work and writing processes, whereas unsuccessful conferences are those which are taken over by the tutors and tend to "exclude student participation in the evaluation process or to preclude evaluation altogether" (1987, p.282).

Murray (1985) expressed his view that students have the responsibility to initiate during the conferences and claims that "it is the responsibility of the student to write and make the first evaluation of his or her experiment in meaning" (1985, p.148). Newkirk (1989) agrees with the notion of student control and initiation of the agenda, also suggesting that students should take up the conversational and evaluative responsibility during the conference. Newkirk acknowledges that during the conference, the students need to play a "paradoxical" role and be put in an awkward situation of becoming an actor taking on the role of members of an academic community during the conference and having to evaluate his or her writing, to address the teacher's questions and make decisions even though they realise that it is their teacher, who is supposed to be more knowledgeable, who is the real member of the academic community (1989, p.318).

During the conference, the teacher should encourage the student to take extended turns to evaluate and make progress with the texts under study. However, it was found that some students could not cope with the taking up of this responsibility and adopted an avoidance strategy in answering teacher's questions in some conferences. This reflected that a student could "shift conversational responsibility back to the teacher" (Newkirk, 1995, p. 207). The unwillingness of a student to actively participate in the conference may affect the quality of conferences. When the student has difficulties in engaging in conversational roles, for example, taking elaborated turns and responding to the teacher, the participants need to reconfigure their roles. Newkirk's studies pinpoint some role conflicts and difficulties for the student in writing conferences and this can further be complicated by the diverse roles of the teacher. The impact of this reality in the Hong Kong context will be addressed in the next chapter regarding research design, especially the nature of conferences offered in this study.

According to Newkirk (1989), the agenda to be covered is crucial in writing conferences. He noted that "unless a commonly-agreed-upon agenda is established, a conference can run on aimlessly and leave both participants with the justifiable feeling that they wasted time" (1989, p.318). Freedman & Sperling (1985) also conducted an investigation about how teacher-student interactions in writing conferences affected written language instruction and how teacher and student interactions in writing conferences affected teaching/learning relationship. They noted that if the teacher and student concerns did not match, they were likely to be "talking at cross purposes" (1985, p.117).

The quality of conferences depends to a great extent on the teachers' attitude, whether teachers should adopt a positive, supportive, critical or confrontational attitude, has always been a dilemma among writing teachers. Pemberton (1997) suggests that:

tutors should try to establish a peer/peer relationship with the students to replace the hierarchical mode of instruction (high-status teachers passing knowledge down to low-status students) with a collaborative model in which the tutors and students become co-learners.

(Pemberton, 1997, p.14)

The readiness of teachers to assume the role of a reader, offer encouragement, ask the right questions, and make specific suggestions for revising and listening to the student work may affect teacher-student perceptions of conferences (Carnicelli, 1980). Teachers' adoption of a flexible approach in catering for the needs of individual students in conferences is one of the main benefits which is absent in a traditional classroom where a transmission mode of teaching and learning prevails.

#### ***2.5.5 Teacher and student roles***

The discussion above makes clear that the nature of the teacher and student interaction is crucial to the conferencing process. Though writing conferences are situated events involving the teacher and the student, it is still difficult to understand the precise mechanics of the teacher and student interaction during the conference in relation to the improvement of writing skills. However, any interaction implies particular roles and relationships between the interlocutors, and the kinds of roles that teachers and students

are willing to take in conferences are important. Sperling (1991) noted that different teacher-student encounters reflected different notions of “student roles, personal ease in engaging an adult interlocutors or authority figure, or willingness to verbalize their writing efforts to a more experienced teacher” (1991, p.155).

Goldstein & Conrad (1990, p.456-457) examined three advanced ESL writers’ texts, conference transcripts, and revisions to determine how discussions in the teacher-student conference influenced students’ subsequent revisions as well as the role that negotiation of meaning plays in students’ success in revising their texts. The findings revealed that there was considerable variation among the three students as to their willingness and ability to initiate topics for discussion and to negotiate meaning with their teachers in the conferences. The researchers also found that changes to the drafts that were based on what had been negotiated between the teacher and the student in the conferences were most likely to result in successful revisions to the students’ texts. Goldstein & Conrad (1990) revealed that there was teacher domination in the conferences. For example, the teacher nominated the topics, did most of the talking, and used questions to engage students in the interaction. Apart from this, there was also variation in the discourse produced in the conference as the teacher might find it necessary to adjust to the students’ individual discourse style and reinforce it, whether or not this resulted in active student participation in the conference. The findings of this study are supported by findings in other studies (Freedman & Sperling, 1985, and Sperling, 1990). It was also found that there were variations across students in the way they interact with the teacher in a conference, for example, in terms of topic initiation

and responding styles. The kinds of discourse strategies used by the teacher and the student and reasons for their variation are rich sources for further research.

#### ***2.5.6 Impact of student ability and proficiency on conference roles and relationships***

In Patthey-Chavez & Ferris's study (1997), they examined first drafts, conference transcripts, revisions, and final drafts of the essay assignment of eight students, four of whom were ESL writers and four of whom were native English speakers (1997, p.84). These eight students were subdivided into strong and weak writers. The findings of their study revealed that "strong" and "weak" writers performed differently in conferences: the stronger students tended to be more assertive about expressing their opinions, thus resulting in more direct exchanges between the teacher and the student. As for the weaker students, the conference seemed to be more teacher-dominated, and the interactions between the teacher and the student tended to be shorter. All these eight student writers revised their texts in ways that could be directly traced to the conference input, with the stronger students demonstrating more autonomy and skill, whereas the weaker students just followed the suggestions of the teachers in the conference (1997, p.84). Patthey-Chavez & Ferris (1997) concluded that in view of the differences in ability, personality, and cultural backgrounds of the student writers, quantitative and qualitative differences in students' willingness to discuss and participate actively in conferences are to be expected (1997, p.86). Teachers' readiness to adjust the instructional strategies in order to cater to these differences is an encouraging sign for providing effective individual instructions to students.

Freedman & Sperling (1985) also observed that students of different proficiency levels received different treatment from teachers during the conferences. They examined the conferences of four native-speaker students: two high-achieving students and two low-achieving students. It was found that the high-achieving students were able to elicit more praise from the teacher, and were invited to return for more conferences, whereas the low-achieving students tended to initiate topics that “alienated” the teachers. Freedman & Sperling (1985) concluded that there was variation in interactions in conferences and that although teachers often try to treat students equally, they were not always able to do this (1985, p.128). Of course, one of the points of conferencing is that there will be differences in interactive patterns and that “these differences in conversational interaction signal the possibility of differential instruction” (Freedman & Sperling, 1985, p.128). However, teachers need to exercise caution so that different patterns of interaction do not disadvantage particular types of students. Further investigation on the teacher-student interaction in writing conferences, particularly as it relates to student differences, is needed to explore these issues in other contexts.

### ***2.5.7 Teacher roles in L2 contexts***

It is worth considering whether the relatively limited language repertoires of students in L2 contexts contributes to teachers assuming a more traditional, teacher-as-expert role than has been reported in L1 studies on conferencing. Some L2 studies on conferencing have examined the interaction patterns in writing conferences and compared them with classroom discourse (e.g., Sperling, 1990, and Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989). In Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo’s ethnographic study with sixth-graders in a multi-ethnic

school, it was found that the teacher's authority and control of knowledge and communication were played out in the conference interaction. The authors claimed that despite "some variation, 'find-and-fix' correction routines were the most common strategy the teacher employed' in conferences" (1989, p.315). They noted that this resembled the traditional classroom situation in which the teacher had a high degree of control.

However, this is not consistently the case, as different results were found in McCarthy's examination of two writing teachers, teaching in two different multi-cultural schools (1992). She found that the teachers being investigated role-shifted across conferences. One teacher changed from being an editor to a supporter of student writing, while the other teacher shifted from supporting students emotionally to intervening in student writing. The change of the teacher's conception of the purpose of the conference was due to the increase in the teacher's involvement and experiences with students. The subjects expressed their view that the teacher should not only give students emotional support, but also intervene to improve students' texts. McCarthy (1992) highlighted the potential for teachers to change their roles within the writing conferences and she concluded that "writing conferences do not necessarily have to replicate traditional classroom interaction patterns in which the teacher corrects mistakes" (1992, p.79).

#### ***2.5.8 Cultural factors in conference interactions***

Teacher-student interactions across conferences differ from one another and one factor contributing to these differences is culture. Studies cited above show teacher flexibility in role adaptation for conferences. However, these studies focus on English speaking

teachers who are conferencing for L2 learners of English in an English speaking environment. Teacher responses towards native and non-native English backgrounds could be very different, and teachers from different backgrounds could well experience different levels of difficulty in adjusting the nature of their teaching roles. Goldstein & Conrad (1990) concluded that the students in their study used different rules from their own culture to interpret how much teachers and students control the discourse when interacting with each other. Moreover, differing cross-cultural expectations about the teacher-student relationship could affect interaction differently across conferences (Freedman & Sperling, 1985). Patthey-Chavez & Ferris (1997) similarly refer to the cultural effects that impact on conferencing dynamics, especially as the cultural effects interact with differing degrees of English proficiency and composition experience (1997, p.85). Some studies on conferencing examined native and non-native English students' conference interactions and drew a reasonable conclusion that differential instruction from the teachers towards high-achievers and low-achievers were found across conferences, so that culture and proficiency levels become joint indicators of potential differences in conference interactions (Freedman & Sperling, 1985, and Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). However, as stated, their studies only involved the native English language teachers and little research on the role of non-native English teachers has been carried out. There is a need to fill this gap in future studies, a gap which this present study attempts to fill.

Newkirk (1995, p.212) has concluded that "role-shifting" is evidenced in the process of conferencing. The teacher may shift to asking questions to direct the conference, and



let the student learn the language and expectations of a conference performance. This act of “saving face” can preserve a collective sense of teacher-student competence. This is an insightful study of native English speaking students in terms of pedagogical and social relationships in conferencing. However, it is not clear whether these findings can be applied to non-native English students, but it stands to reason that students learning English as an L2 would certainly need to learn the language and expectations of conferencing at least as much as L1 users of the language.

The conference participants’ communication styles and attitudes toward power relations may also vary across cultures. Sperling (1991) claims that one of the Asian-American students’ quiet manner reflected culturally derived respect for authority. As Sperling did not provide adequate evidence for her claim about cultural stereotypes of Asians tending to respect authority, more investigations are needed to support her arguments. Moreover, Sperling (1991) described the case of another student as a “teacher-pleasing student” (p.150), reflecting a vocal collaborative role and feeling out what the teacher wants. It would be interesting to find out if other students have the same perception towards the teacher and to find out how they interpret teacher comments on their essays.

While the ‘respect’ issue is unsubstantiated, and teacher-pleasing attitudes may not be culturally located, it is relevant to consider Hong Kong teacher and student attitudes about roles and responsibilities as outlined in the Introduction, and the possible impact on the nature of interactions in teacher-student conferencing in Hong Kong schools.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Feedback is crucial for a writer to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of his/her writing so that he/she can go about revising his/her work to make it more effective. Feedback should address both the meaning and form of the written work, although not necessarily at the same time, depending on student needs. Effective feedback enables students to develop awareness of good writing and to improve the quality not only of their current piece of writing but also subsequent pieces. Therefore, writing teachers should consider the advantages and disadvantages of the different modes of teacher feedback delivery. Likewise, they should take into account real-world constraints such as the number of students they teach and students' preference for modes of feedback delivery may vary extensively depending on their personality, cultural expectations, or learning style. However, identifying the most effective mode of feedback remains an open and important question that is yet to be explored empirically and investigated thoroughly within the classroom context. The research cited in this *Literature Review* suggests the efficacy of teacher-student conferencing as a tool in the delivery and negotiation of the kind of feedback which students need. Given that different cultures may experience the benefits of conferencing differently, it becomes significant to investigate the relative benefits of this form of feedback in the Hong Kong context. The next chapter will describe in detail how this will be achieved.

# Chapter 3

## 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter Section 3.1 provides the rationale for the adoption of a mixed methods approach (the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches) as the most effective way to address all the aims and questions of the research study. The aims and questions which support the investigation of the main hypothesis are presented here. Section 3.2 gives an overall description of the research design of this study. Section 3.3 discusses the validity, reliability, and ethical issues in relation to the research design. This is followed by Section 3.4, which explains how the data will be obtained and analysed.

### 3.1 Mixed methods approach for this study

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are adopted for this study due to the fact that the first and the second research questions in this study can best be answered using a quantitative approach (use of an experiment) whereas the third research question can best be answered using a qualitative approach (use of an interview). In the following discussion, there is first of all a discussion of the characteristics of experimental research before justifying its use for this study.

#### 3.1.1 *Advantages in using an experimental approach*

Positivists hold the view that the acquisition of genuine knowledge can be acquired by means of observation and experiment, an approach described by Beck (1979) as a “tough-minded orientation to facts and natural phenomena” (1979, p.27). According to Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2001), the tenets of scientific faith are based on the core

belief that events have causes and they are determined by other circumstances (2001, p.10). Scientists have the dual role of not only explaining causal links among events but also of formulating laws to explain happenings in the world around them, thus giving a firm basis for prediction and control. In short, the ultimate aim of science is to develop theories which Kerlinger (1970) defined as “a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena” (1970,p.11). Hypotheses, defined by Kerlinger (1970) as “conjectural statements, a tentative proposition, about the relation between two or more observed (sometimes unobservable, especially in psychology and education) phenomena or variables,” (1970, p.14) are generated from theories and help scientists to identify critical areas for investigation and to test the stated relations among the variables.

Notions of “experiment”, “independent variable”, “dependent variable” and “educational research” are important within this paradigm. Wiersma (1995) defines “experiment” as a “research situation in which at least one variable, called the experimental variable, is deliberately manipulated or varied by the researcher” (p.105). The term “experimental variable” also commonly referred to as the “independent variable” is explained by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2001) as a change made by the researcher to the value of one variable in an experimental situation in order to observe the effect of that change on another variable – called the “dependent variable” (2001, p.211). The term “educational research” is defined by Mouly (1978) as “the systematic and scholarly application of the scientific method, interpreted in its broadest sense, to the solution of educational

problems” (1978, p.4). Fraenkel & Wallen (2005) claim that two conditions need to be satisfied before an experiment can be performed. The first one is that there must at least be two or more methods that are compared so as to compare the effects of particular conditions or “treatments”. The second one is that the independent variable (the treatment) is directly manipulated by the researcher. Change is planned for and deliberately manipulated in order to study its effect(s) on one or more outcome (the dependent variable) (2005, p.268).

Since the aim of this study is to find whether teacher-student conferencing can lead to greater improvement in both content and grammatical accuracy as a result of the different treatment students receive, the mode of the feedback that students receive from the teacher is the independent variable. In this case, the use of an experiment is most appropriate as it allows the researcher to manipulate the independent variable (the experimental group receiving verbal feedback and the control group receiving written feedback) and observe or measure the groups receiving different treatments (for example, by means of a post-test) to note any differences after the treatment has been administered. If the average scores of the groups on the post-test do differ and researchers can exert good control over the extraneous variables, so there is no possible alternative explanation of results, they can reasonably and reliably conclude that the treatment did have an effect and is the likely cause of the difference. Thus, an experimental method is adopted for this study.

However, the use of experiments in researches has its constraints. One cause of concern is that performing experiments on individuals has been criticised as undermining life and

mind. Ions (1977) is very much concerned with the dehumanizing effect of experimentation. He finds the use of quantifiable data to interpret human behaviour unacceptable as the findings presented are not a fair representation of the human being. To him, a study which “explore[s] and elucidate[s] the gritty circumstances of the human condition” is a better way to study human behaviour (1977, p.154). Hampden-Turner (1970) also comments that a social scientist’s view of human beings that is based on scientific positivism should be discarded as such a view focuses just on the repetitive, predictable and invariant aspects of the person, whereas “what human beings regard as important and salient in their lives are their novel and non-repetitive activities” and not “precise and invariable patterns of behaviour” (1970, p.7). Habermas (1972) also concedes to the view that any positivist approach of social science research fails to provide satisfactory answers to questions about important areas of life (1972, p.300). Indeed this criticism coincides with the comment of Wittgenstein’s (1974) who recapitulates the inadequacies of the positivist approach in understanding life by stating: “when all possible scientific questions have been addressed they have left untouched the main problems of life” (1974, p.73, 6.52).

These of course are fairly extreme views about quantitative or experimental research, comments which probably apply more closely to laboratory-based experiments than to attempts to manage variables in a “real” situation for the ultimate benefit of the experimental participants. However, the point is clear that experimental research, while offering a reliable interpretation of a repeatable set of conditions, does not necessarily give the full story about any educational situation.

### ***3.1.2 Advantages in using interviews***

Although objective data for this study could be obtained using an experimental approach, such results would be unable to provide distinctive information on the participants' attitudes towards the different modes of feedback on writing, namely, written feedback and teacher-student conferencing and hence to find an answer to the third research question for the study: What is the affective response of students to teacher-student conferencing?

Therefore, the qualitative approach of using an interview is incorporated into the research design. One of the main advantages of using interviews in educational research is that they provide a very flexible method of data collection. Researchers can adopt different approaches when collecting research information to meet their research objectives. If the purpose of the study is to obtain numerical, factual or objective data across cohorts, it is expected that the data obtained will be more standardised and quantitative. On the other hand, if the purpose of the study is to acquire unique, non-standardised information about how individuals view the world, the interviewer will veer towards qualitative open-ended unstructured interviewing.

Borg (1963) points out that the use of interview allows flexibility in the collection of relevant research data and almost certainly guarantees that the researcher can gain a higher response rate and more comprehensive information than if questionnaires alone are used (1963, p.221). The advantage of conducting interviews is explained by Tuckman (1999) as providing "access to what is 'inside a person's head' ... [making] it possible to measure what a person knows (knowledge or information), what a person

likes or dislikes (values and preferences), and what a person thinks (attitudes and beliefs)” (1999, p.237). It enables the researcher to obtain important data that cannot so validly be obtained through other methods of data collection such as observation or survey research.

There are many types of interviews. Patton (1980) categorises interviews into four different types; informal conversational interviews (non-directive interviews), interview guide approaches (semi-structured interviews/focused interviews), standardised open-ended interviews (unstructured interviews), and closed quantitative interviews (structured interviews) (1980, p.206). Although each of these interview types has both its advantages and disadvantages, the discussion below focuses on justifying the choice of the semi-structured interview as a method for this study.

In this study, the semi-structured interview was adopted as this kind of interview was deemed most likely to elicit the kind of research data needed to answer one of the research questions. As Morrison (1993) suggests, it allows in-depth probing while permitting the interviewer to keep the informant within the parameters of the research study (1993, p.66). At the same time, the questions asked of the interviewees touch on personal opinions about learning preferences, and these are better explored in an in-depth interview in order to allow the students to disclose their feelings to an individual directly concerned with the issues at hand.

To conduct this kind of interview, a written list of questions is prepared prior to the interview to ensure that all relevant topics are covered. Open-ended questions are often



used in this type of interview, allowing the interviewer to probe further into the responses of the informant and to clear up any misunderstandings. In short, there is structure which assists data collection and analysis, but, at the same time, scope for flexibility in pursuing particular lines of thought raised by participants. This format offers more systematic and comprehensive data than unstructured interviews, but allows greater flexibility and responsiveness to emerging issues than occurs with structured interviews, which restrict participants possible responses so that any answers given may not be adequate representatives of their opinions or situations.

However, the use of interviews in educational research is not without disadvantages. Gillham (2000, p.9) and Drever (2003, p.2) share the view that interviewing is a very time-consuming process especially when it is conducted on a one-to-one basis. The process of collating and evaluating the large amount of data obtained in interviews can be a daunting task for the researcher especially when analyzing the content. Kvale (1996) expresses concern over the validity of data obtained from unstructured interviews or semi-structured interviews as the experience, training, and communication and interpretive skills of the interviewer can affect the quality of data obtained (1996, p.126).

Having considered the aims of conducting this study and the relevance of the various interview types for this study, in spite of any possible shortcomings as noted by Kvale (1996), the semi-structured interview is justified as most relevant for the first and third research aims, and the final research question of this study: aims and questions to do with students' attitudes and preferences.

### ***3.1.3 Balanced approach to address study aims and guiding questions***

As has been outlined above, in this study, the adoption of quantitative and qualitative approaches is not a case of either or, but on how each contribute to the body of educational knowledge and understanding. The adoption of a mixed methods approach enables the researcher to pursue a more balanced approach in pursuit of a deeper understanding of classroom realities regarding feedback on writing. Strategies have been drawn from both according to how they best achieve a balance of reliability and validity in addressing the following aims and questions.

This study aims to investigate:

- ◆ Students' reactions to different modes of feedback on writing, namely, written feedback or verbal feedback (conferencing).
- ◆ Means of enhancing the effectiveness of English teachers' commentaries and students' revisions.
- ◆ Whether or not the interest of students in learning English can be enhanced by improving their writing abilities.

The above aims are guided by the following research questions:

- ◆ Does teacher-student conferencing lead to greater improvement of content in student writing than the use of written feedback?

- ◆ Does teacher-student conferencing help improve the grammatical accuracy in student writing as compared to written feedback?
- ◆ What is the affective response of students to teacher-student conferencing?

The pursuit of these aims will contribute to the body of knowledge about teacher-student conferencing in the Hong Kong context with its unique culture and set of teacher-student relationship, and guide the research of the main hypothesis.

#### **3.1.4 Hypothesis**

Teacher-student conferencing can help improve the writing ability of students in terms of content and grammatical accuracy compared to written feedback, and that this improved writing ability impacts positively on motivation to learn English.

### **3.2 Research design**

The first part of the research design, the procedures for conducting the pilot study, is described in 3.2.1. The procedures adopted for the main study are outlined in 3.2.2. Next, 3.2.3 describes how the semi-structured interviews were conducted. Finally, 3.2.4 describes the rationale for conducting the follow-up conferences and two group interviews of conference participants after the main study was completed, and how they were conducted.

#### **3.2.1 Pilot study**

A pilot study that lasted for four weeks was conducted to identify any flaws or weakness in the research design. Eight 17-year-old students in their sixth year of secondary school

who had all obtained a passing grade (Grade D or E) at the *Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination* taken upon completion of Secondary five were involved in this pilot study. The aim of the current study was to measure the relative improvement of each subject before and after the treatment rather than comparing any improvement among the subjects. These eight students were randomly selected from a total population of 62 Secondary six students from a secondary school in Hong Kong using a computer program, Excel 2003, with the function RAND ( ) to generate 8 random numbers between 0 and 1. The random numbers are then multiplied with the total number of students ( $n = 62$ ).

All eight students came from different educational backgrounds having completed their Secondary five in schools of different bandings. Hong Kong schools are categorized into Band 1, Band 2, or Band 3 with Band 1 schools enrolling the most able and highly-achieving students. Secondary schools in Hong Kong mostly admit students at the age of 12 when they start their first year of secondary education and are likely to stay until they complete Secondary five. These eight students mainly came from Bands 1 and 2 schools and were admitted to Secondary six in a Band 3 school due to their low passing grades at the *Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination* (students who are qualified to be admitted to Secondary six are required to obtain a minimum of eight points in the best six subjects at the *Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination* upon completion of their Secondary five. These Secondary six students will be sitting for the *Advanced Level Examination* upon completion of Secondary seven and will be admitted to a university if good ratings can be obtained from this examination).

The eight students were informed that they had not been singled out as individuals for the study, but had been randomly selected in an attempt to study the general student population of which they are a part. They were also guaranteed that their right to anonymity and confidentiality would not be compromised in any way by taking part in this study.

After indicating their willingness to be part of this project, the procedures of the study were explained to them. The eight students were then randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control group using the method as previously described. The students in both groups followed the same curriculum, used the same teaching materials, and were taught by the same teacher-researcher.

A pre-writing test was administered to the eight students before the research was conducted. See Appendix 1 for the pre-test writing task for the pilot study. (Additional writing tasks are in the addenda). The pre-writing test was held after school, and each participant was required to write about 350 words on a given topic within one hour and fifteen minutes. No feedback on the pre-writing test was given.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the study, two native English-speaking teachers with similar academic qualifications and teaching experience (one teacher has 18 years of teaching experiences and the other 20; both had received teacher training in English language teaching) independently used the same marking scheme (Appendix 2) to award scores to the students' quality of writing. The two sets of scores of the student

participants were recorded by the teacher-researcher to be compared with the scores in the post-test writing.

One week after the pre-writing test, the eight student participants were given another writing task to complete within one hour and fifteen minutes after school. The first writing assignment was assessed by the same native English-speaking teachers. The teacher-researcher gave the students feedback within a week from the time the writing was done. The students in the experimental group were involved in teacher-student conferencing. The conferences were conducted according to the following guidelines:

- ◆ Each conference should last for 10-15 minutes.
- ◆ The teacher will give verbal comments on the students' writing performance, which may include identification of errors, and also identify areas for improvement in terms of the relevance, coherence and organisation of the content and the vocabulary, language use and mechanics of the writing. The emphasis is on helping students produce a higher quality (better ideas, organisation...) rather than just a more correct redraft.
- ◆ The questions raised by students should be restricted to the specific piece of writing under discussion.

In contrast, the students in the control group were provided with written feedback of about 80-100 words relating to the same criteria mentioned above.

The students in the experimental and control group were required to perform writing corrections based on the verbal or written feedback of the teacher-researcher along with the codes written on all scripts indicating the kinds of errors made. They were given three days to do the redrafts at home.

The redrafts of the students' writing were again assessed by the same native English-speaking teachers. The same writing procedure was repeated for the second writing assignment. After two feedback sessions were given to the students by the teacher-researcher, and two redrafts were done, the eight student participants were then asked to stay after school one afternoon for a post-writing test. They were given the same time and word quotas as in the pre-writing test. Their writing was assessed by the same markers. These scores were compared with their scores in the pre-writing test using paired-samples t-test. This was done using SPSS statistical computer package (Version 15). The aim was to determine if teacher-student conferencing had a greater effect on the writing competence of students than written feedback.

### **3.2.2 *Main study***

After the pilot study confirmed that the hypothesis could be reasonably tested through the proposed experimental design, the main study was carried out on 34 seventeen-year-old students who were in their sixth year in secondary school. The same steps as in the pilot study were conducted during the main study except that the main study lasted for six months and the number of students involved in the main study was 34. The total number of Secondary six students was originally 62. However, excluding the eight students who were involved in the pilot study, only 54 students remained. Among these students from

both the arts and science classes, 34 students were randomly selected using the method previously described and were allocated to either the experimental or the control group.

The allocation of students to either the experimental or control group was done using the method adopted for the pilot study, with 17 students in the experimental group receiving teacher-student conferencing as the mode of feedback on their writing, and 17 students in the control group receiving written commentary.

The students in the main study sat for a pre-test (before treatment was given) and post-test (after treatment was given), which were assessed independently by two native English-speaking teachers. A sample writing task is in Appendix 3. Other writing tasks are in the addenda. The revised marking scheme, based on revisions suggested by the markers in the pilot study, is in Appendix 4. Scores for the pre-test and post-test served as the basis for comparison of the students' performance in both experimental and control groups.

After the pre-writing test, the student participants in the main study completed four writing assignments. These assignments were assessed by the same native English-speaking teachers who assessed the pre-test. Writing feedback was then provided by the teacher-researcher, with the students in the experimental group receiving comments in a conference context, and those in the control group receiving written comments.

To ensure that the feedback given to students in both experimental and control groups was similar, the teacher-researcher followed the same guidelines for teacher-student conferencing used in the pilot study. These guidelines were to inform the written



comments for the control group as well as the verbal comments for the experimental group. Students in the control group were provided with written feedback of about 80-100 words relating to the same criteria mentioned above.

It is worth noting that the conference sessions described above differ in tone from those recommended in the literature cited in Chapter 2. When conducting conference sessions with students in this study, the teacher/researcher was required to follow a set of guidelines whereas the research literature identifies successful conferences as those where students set the agenda and actively participate in the evaluation of their own writing (Walker & Elias, 1987, p.268). The reasons for the deviation from the recommended approach were that attempts had to be made to control the extraneous variables so as to make possible the more reliable comparison of the different feedback treatments students received. Were all conferences to widely diverge from each other in type, tone and length, depending on students' agendas, it would be difficult to draw any general conclusions about conferencing per se. Another reason for having a more teacher-controlled conference was that students in Hong Kong, as mentioned in the *Introduction*, have culturally bound assumptions about how it is the teacher's responsibility to decide how students should be taught in the classroom and not the students, and to identify errors for them. This was to be students' first experience of teacher-student conferences, and it did not seem reasonable to expect students with no experience of this, and with fairly traditional perspectives of teacher-student interactional norms, to take an initiating role in the conferences for this study. Aside from their lack of experience and preparation for this kind of role, to make students assume a role for

which they were not psychologically prepared might cause problems during the conference sessions and possibly affect the reliability of the findings in the research. In addition, it is the inherent quality of interaction between teacher and student that a conference session can offer that is absent in written feedback and is one of the important aspects that is to be tested in this study.

The students in the experimental and control groups were then required to redraft based on the verbal or written feedback of the teacher-researcher along with the codes written on all scripts indicating the kinds of errors made.

The redrafts of the students' writing were again assessed by the same native English-speaking teachers. The scores provided to student writing before and after feedback were recorded for comparison of the effectiveness between the different modes of feedback students received for each of the groups. The same writing procedure was repeated for the next assignment.

Although objective data was thus obtained using an experimental approach, nothing in this data would have been able to provide distinctive information about the participants' attitudes towards the different modes of feedback on writing, namely, written feedback and teacher-student conferencing. Six semi-structured interviews were therefore conducted in this study to find answers to the research question "What is the affective response of students to teacher-student conferencing?" The interviews will be discussed in the section which follows.

### **3.2.3 *Semi-structured interviews***

To gather data to address the affective aim of this study, semi-structured interviews were held. Six student participants in the main study were selected using the stratified purposeful sampling method. This method is explained by Gall et al (2003) as a method which involves “selecting a sample so that certain subgroups in the population are adequately represented in the sample” (2003, p.173). They further explained that “a stratified purposeful sample” includes several cases at defined points of variation (e.g., average, above average, and below average) with respect to the phenomena being studied. By including several cases of each type, “the researcher can develop insights into the characteristics of each type, as well as insights into the variations that exist across types” (Gall et al, 2003, p.179). Students who were invited to attend a semi-structured interview after the conduct of the main study were students selected from each of the experimental and control groups, with three students from each group. The criterion for selection was based on students’ performance in the post-test in the main study – selecting the highest mark, average mark and lowest mark from each of the groups in order to present an overview of students’ reactions towards different modes of feedback based on their different ability levels. Although it has been noted earlier that the student participants were of similar levels of proficiency, this broad similarity does not preclude the possibility of different levels of accuracy and fluency within broad bands of proficiency, which would be reflected in a range of grades. The semi-structured interviews were not piloted because the criterion for selection was based on students’ performance in the post-test in the main study – selecting the highest mark, average mark and lowest mark from each of the groups – and this could not be determined in advance.

Before the interviews, the consent of these six students was obtained, and they were informed of the general nature of the interview. This gave them some time to think about the possible issues that they might like to raise.

The 20-minute interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The questions posed were related to the students' preference for the kind of feedback they want to receive from their English teachers and the problems they usually encounter when being asked to revise based on the various kinds of feedback provided by their teachers.

Before the interviews, an interview schedule was developed based on the teacher-researcher's personal observation of the students' responses about their writing assignments and discussions with other English teachers. The questions in each section were arranged so that factual and objective questions were asked first, followed by questions asking for the interviewees' personal feelings about a particular aspect. This schedule addressed students' background, previous experience with feedback and suggestions for improvement as outlined below:

A. Background

1. How long have you been studying in your present school?
2. How many years have you been learning English?
3. How many languages are you required to study in school? What are they?
4. Which is the language you like most?

5. Which language do you find most difficult to learn well?
6. How would you describe your current level of English proficiency?

B. Feedback on writing from previous writing teachers

1. Before you studied Secondary 6 in this school, how did you feel each time your essay was returned to you?
2. What were your major concerns each time when your essay was returned to you?
3. Did your teacher give you any feedback on your writing?
  - If yes, what kind of feedback did your teacher normally give you?
  - From the feedback provided, which do you think is the most important to you? For example, the marks or comments (reasons for choice)
  - Which kind of feedback do you think will be more useful to you?
4. How did you feel each time when you were asked to do corrections for your written work?
  - How did you do your corrections?
  - If you had problems with your corrections, what would you do? (for example, ask help from teachers, classmates, friends; or find reference materials to help you)
  - Did you approach your teacher for help when you had problems with your corrections? (if yes, how often did you approach your teacher for help with your corrections?)

- In what ways did you think your teacher can help you with your correction?

C. Suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of feedback on writing

1. What do you think are some ways to enhance the effectiveness of feedback on writing?
2. Do you think that students' interest in learning English can be enhanced through the improvement of their writing ability?

The procedures for the semi-structured interviews were designed so the interviewer would start by introducing the purpose of the interview to each of the six student interviewees. During the interviews, the interviewer referred to the above schedule to ensure that information essential for comparability within the study was elicited, but the questions in the interview schedule were not necessarily read verbatim. The interviewer also encouraged the interviewees to clarify or elaborate on their answers in order to gain a complete understanding of the interviewees' viewpoint. The interview sessions were held in the English Corner (a classroom where students practise their spoken English with the native-speaking English teacher) after school for five consecutive days, with two interviews recorded on the fifth day.

Once the taped interviews were transcribed, each transcript was read and coded. Each response in the interview was coded where possible according to whether it reflected a positive, neutral or negative view of written feedback, verbal feedback and English writing in general.

General themes were identified, and a record maintained of the number of students who touched on the emerging themes.

#### ***3.2.4 Follow-up conference sessions and group interviews after the main study***

To overcome potential limitations in validity caused by the researcher being the teacher, with the potential for students to report what they think their teacher wants to hear rather than what is true for them, a wider sample of student responses to different types of feedback was collected through group conferencing sessions. Unlike the students in the main study, these were students who had not been taught by the researcher but were from the same school and the same year level. The researcher only conducted the conference sessions but was not involved in the interviewing of the students. Rather these students were interviewed by a colleague of the researcher, who also was not the teacher of these students. The underlying assumption was that students could more freely express genuine responses to someone who was not involved in their education. These extra conferences and post-conference interviews also help to broaden the range of data collected about reactions to conferences, given that half the group in the main study did not experience these, and so could hardly offer valid comment about which they prefer in any post feedback interview.

These group interviews occurred some time after the initial semi-structured interviews, and reflected some deliberate changes as a response to the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 5). The first interviews were conducted in English as a conscious research design in the main study as the teacher/researcher wanted to avoid translating or reinterpreting the ideas of the students. However, the impression of the researcher

during those interviews was that some students were impeded by their language limitations. Therefore, in the interest of eliciting more spontaneous and extended student responses, it was decided to use Cantonese as the medium for subsequent interviews.

Two conferencing sessions, with two weeks in between each session, were conducted with three students from a different band 3 school who were not taught by the researcher and were selected based on their different levels of performance in *Use of English* in the Secondary six first term examination, obtaining the highest mark, the middle mark and the lowest mark.

After obtaining the consent of this group of three students to be the participants in the group conference, these students were asked to stay after school to write an essay within 1 hour 15 minutes (the usual time allocated for the *Use of English Writing Exam paper*). The researcher read the papers and scheduled a time after school to see each of the three students in the group in turn to discuss the paper. Each meeting lasted for 15 minutes, with the same guidelines for teacher-student conferencing adopted as in the main study. Before the group interview, each of the students was asked to bring their work or any relevant notes to the interview in order to make their responses more specific and in-depth. A group interview conducted by a colleague of the researcher in Cantonese was held to discuss the effectiveness of teacher-student conferencing with the three students. The interview data were translated, transcribed, and categorized. The researcher kept a diary of students' reactions and responses during each of the conference sessions to see if connections could be made to previous findings, whether group patterns could be



identified and links made with the teacher diary so that particular issues could be seen from different angles. The diaries would also help identify the intensity of students' responses, and their overall demeanour in conferencing situations. For each conference, the researcher recorded impressions against a Likert scale, where one is low and five is high. The qualities on the Likert scale include students' ease in the situation, the spontaneity or readiness of responses, their confidence in interactions, taking initiative by raising ideas or questions and how extended the responses were. These impressions were then fleshed out in more extended notes written immediately after the conferences.

After two weeks, the same procedures were applied again, with the students experiencing another writing task, conferencing and follow-up group interview. The second conference and interviews were an opportunity to validate comments from the first interview and note any strengthening or change in attitudes as a result of further experience with conferencing.

As with the semi-structured interview, the group interviews were taped and transcribed. For these interviews, there was an additional step of translation from Cantonese into English. The researcher translated the transcriptions. After translation, the group interviews were coded. Each response in the interview was coded according to whether it reflected a positive, neutral or negative view of written feedback, verbal feedback and English writing in general. Again, general themes were identified, and a record maintained of the number of students who touched on the emerging themes. The transcripts for the first and second group interviews were compared to check for

consistency, and also to note any strengthening themes or attitudes, or changes of any kind with additional experience with conferencing.

### 3.2.5 Summary of the research design

The following table is a summary of the research design for this study:

<b>Stage 1</b> Pilot study	<b>Duration</b>	4 weeks
	<b>No. of Subjects</b>	8 (4 students in the experimental group; 4 students in the control group)
	<b>Methodology</b>	Pre-test followed by 2 writing assignments and 2 revisions based on teacher commentary (students receiving either teacher-student conferencing or written commentary) and the post-test
↓		
<b>Stage 2</b> Main study	<b>Duration</b>	6 months
	<b>No. of Subjects</b>	34 (17 students in the experimental group; 17 students in the control group)
	<b>Methodology</b>	Pre-test followed by 4 writing assignments and 4 revisions based on teacher commentary (students receiving either teacher-student conferencing or written commentary) and the post-test
↓		
<b>Stage 3</b> Semi-structured interviews	<b>Duration</b>	5 days
	<b>No. of Subjects</b>	6 (3 students from the experimental group; 3 students from the control group)
	<b>Methodology</b>	Individual interviews based on the interview schedule
↓		
<b>Stage 4</b> Group interviews	<b>Duration</b>	2 weeks
	<b>No. of Subjects</b>	3 students from each level of proficiency: high, intermediate and low
	<b>Methodology</b>	Two group interviews conducted two weeks in-between to find out students' views towards teacher-student conferencing

The pilot study was a small scale version of the main study to test the reliability and validity of the overall research design. Based on the pilot study, minor adjustments were

made to the overall research design notably in the marking criteria and standards. The main study collected quantitative and qualitative data to test the main hypothesis data which was triangulated with further conferences and interviews with a group of students as well as teacher-researcher journal entries of these conferences and interviews.

### **3.3 Validity, reliability, and ethical issues in relation to the research design**

Validity and reliability have been alluded to frequently in the outline of the research design, including the experimental study, the semi-structured interviews and the follow-up group interviews. This section will address these more explicitly. This is then followed by a discussion of the ethical issues related to the main study, the semi-structured interviews and the follow-up group interviews.

#### ***3.3.1 Validity and reliability in the experimental study***

Experiments are susceptible to technical and procedural errors. To ensure that the findings in any experiment are meaningful and trustworthy, appropriate measures should be taken to safeguard against errors of this nature. The researcher must be confident that factors such as extraneous variables have been controlled and have not produced an effect that might be mistaken as an experimental treatment effect.

The following is an examination of whether this main study fulfills the criteria for an effective experiment, that is, whether there is adequate control of extraneous variables to minimise the threat to internal and external validity. The discussion which follows is based on the possible threats to internal and external validity as mentioned by Campbell & Stanley (1963); namely, history, maturation, testing, instrumentation, statistical

regression, differential selection of subjects, selection maturation interaction, and experimental mortality (1963, p.5).

According to Campbell & Stanley (1963), “history” suggests that the dependent variable may be affected by unanticipated events, which occur while the experiment is in progress. In the main study, “history” is not regarded as much of a threat because the students were taught by the same teacher-researcher. Furthermore, the students in both the experimental and control groups were taught in the same way using the same materials during the lessons. The amount of work done during the period of the experiment was also the same, with the students given the same amount of time to do the same writing tasks.

Because the main study lasted for only six months, “maturation”, the processes operating within the respondents as a result of the passage of time could possibly have occurred but would be the same for both groups and therefore would not interfere with any differences between the groups.

Moreover, the effect of “testing” has been adequately controlled as the pre-test writing topic was unlikely to affect their performance in the post-test, that is, they had been given different topics to write on. Similarities are found only in so much as the topics were related to the students’ everyday life, and both were expository in genre. For these written assignments, no experimental treatment was given to the subjects in the control group. The written feedback was deliberately very much along the lines that students

usually experience particularly to ensure that “testing” would be confined to the conferencing treatment.

With regard to “instrumentation”, efforts were made to ensure that there was consistent use of the measuring instruments. As stated, two native English-speaking teachers with similar academic qualifications and teaching experience were invited to score the student essays independently based on the same marking scheme. The teacher-researcher was not involved in the marking process of the main study so that objectivity and impartiality were ensured.

Statistical regression, an effect caused by the selection of subjects based on extreme scores, whereby these scores “regress” towards the mean, was addressed prior to the study. Among the two secondary six classes, there was one student who scored a “B” (Syllabus B) at the *Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination*, and her English proficiency level far surpassed that of the other students in class. As it was the amount of improvement in scores and not the scores themselves that are under study, the decision to include this student in the study should be of no concern. Experimental treatment, or the lack of it, should not be seen to affect her scores any more than the rest of the population under study. In fact, removing her from the selection process may be considered as selection bias.

Furthermore, there was no “selection bias” because all 34 subjects were randomly selected from the available population and then were randomly assigned to either the experimental or control group. This eliminated the threat of “selection-maturation

interaction”, an effect of maturation not being consistent across the groups because of biases in the selection of subjects.

As these 34 students in this main study were full-time registered students of the school and were present during the entire experimentation period, “experimental mortality”, the dropping out of subjects from comparison groups did not occur.

External validity is of equal importance to the assurance of internal validity in any experimental research. According to Campbell & Stanley (1963), external validity may be jeopardized by several factors. One of these factors is the “reactive or interaction effect of testing”, that is, “a pretest might increase or decrease the respondent’s sensitivity or responsiveness to the experimental variable and thus make the results obtained for a pretest population unrepresentative of the effects of the experimental variable for the unpretested universe from which the experienced respondents were selected” (1963, p.5-6). Because the participants in this study were not exposed, whether directly or indirectly, to experimental treatment (teaching-student conferencing) during pre-testing, the results can be generalised to a population that had not been pre-tested.

On the other hand, Campbell & Stanley (1963) suggested that a second factor which may jeopardise external validity is the “interaction effects of selection biases and the experimental variable” (1963, p.6). In this study, the interaction effects of selection biases could not have emerged because there was random sampling of the subjects within the available population.

Campbell & Stanley (1963) also suggest that the “reactive effects of experimental arrangements” which may “preclude generalization about the effect of the experimental variable upon persons being exposed to it in non-experimental settings” may also be a threat to the external validity of a research study (1963, p.6). Nonetheless, this matter should not be an issue in this study. Any time a student is asked to produce a written piece that is to be assessed, regardless of the specific reason for acquiring the grade, the fact remains that his/her abilities are being assessed. Despite any “novelty” that the students may have experienced in being randomly selected to take part in this study, it is unlikely that the excitement/anxiety caused could have any effect on the results any more than if they were asked to complete a written task during an examination or under examination conditions; they know their writing skills will be “examined” and thus approach the task in their “usual” way.

Reliability in an experiment is also a prerequisite in the assessment of the effectiveness of the experimental design. Within the positivist paradigm, a research study is deemed reliable if the instrumentation, data, and findings can be controlled, and the results are predictable, consistent, and replicable. The reliability of equivalence can be observed in this study as the same data-gathering instrument applied simultaneously to the experimental group and the comparison group. Moreover, there is inter-rater reliability because the study involved not only the teacher-researcher but also two independent markers who were responsible for awarding the scores to the students’ work.

In short, because adequate experimental control has been imposed on the study's extraneous variables and efforts have been made to maximize internal and external validity, the findings in this main study can be regarded as valid and reliable.

### ***3.3.2 Validity and reliability in the semi-structured interviews***

Validity and reliability are two areas of concern in the use of interviews in educational research (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2005, p.441). These two terms are defined as follows:

Validity refers to the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the inferences researchers make based on the data they collect, while reliability refers to the consistency of these inferences over time, location, and circumstances.

(Fraenkel & Wallen, 2005, p.462)

At the planning stage of this semi-structured interview, consideration was given to the following factors that might have affected the reliability of the findings.

The role of the teacher-researcher may affect the interviewees' willingness to provide genuine responses to the research questions under study, or the interviewees may tend to give answers they think the researcher would like to hear. An attempt to overcome this shortcoming was that the subject researcher had made it clear to each of the student participants prior to the interview that the main aim of the study was to enable the teacher-researcher to determine the effectiveness of the different modes of teacher feedback so that more effective teaching strategies could be subsequently devised to enable them to achieve better examination results in the *Advanced Supplementary Use of*



*English Examination.* In this way, it is hoped that the student participants might be more frank in responding to the interviewer's questions posed to them.

Other problems that might have affected the reliability of the findings of a semi-structured interview include the risk that the researcher may become too involved in the process, perhaps framing the interviewees' responses; therefore, there is the threat that the data obtained may lack objectivity. Additionally, there is still the question of whether the interviewer's relationship with the informants may have affected the responses given. The dual role of being the interviewer and the interviewees' English teacher might be a cause for concern because this could have affected the responses. The follow-up conferences and interviews were intended to compensate for this possible effect.

Some of the strategies that were adopted in this study to enhance validity and to minimise biases were those suggested by Gay & Airasian (2000, p.224-225). These strategies are summarized as follows:

- ◆ The interviewer had to build participant trust, thereby improving the likelihood of gaining more detailed, honest information from the participants.
- ◆ The interviewer worked with another researcher who independently gathered data for subsequent comparison.
- ◆ Participants reviewed and critically assessed the transcripts for accuracy and meaning.

- ◆ Different data sources were used for reference purposes. (Data obtained in semi-structured interviews can be compared to others from similar studies as well as to data from the follow-up group interviews.)

To address the issue of reliability, an interview schedule was developed, so that each student would experience roughly similar wording and order of questions.

Since objective data had already been obtained in the main study using the experimental method, the data obtained in interviews can be used to validate the findings of the experimental research. If the findings of semi-structured interviews correspond with the results obtained in an experiment of the same phenomena, the validity of the interview can be enhanced.

### ***3.3.3 Validity and reliability in the follow-up conferences and interviews***

The follow-up conferences and interviews were in themselves strategies to improve validity and reliability of the main study. It was noted earlier that the role of the teacher-researcher may affect the interviewees' willingness to provide genuine responses to the research questions under study, giving answers they think the researcher would like to hear. An attempt to overcome this shortcoming was that the three students who were involved in the two group interviews were not taught by the researcher. The interviews were in fact conducted by a colleague of the researcher who had 19 years of experience teaching Secondary 6 *Use of English*. The interviewer also did not teach the student participants in the two group interviews. Given that neither the teacher-researcher nor the colleague of the teacher-researcher were directly involved in the teaching of these

students, it was anticipated that the student participants might be more relaxed, frank and open in responding to the interviewer's questions.

In addition, the purpose of the interviews was clearly explained to the student participants, that is, to find out the mode of feedback which could best cater for the needs of students and improve their writing competence. This gives students a vested interest in giving frank responses and opinions in the interviews.

The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the mother tongue of the students, with the intention of promoting more spontaneous and genuine responses, with students not being held back by having to formulate their thoughts in ways that might be difficult for them.

Once interviews were coded, the transcripts were shown to the interview participants. They were asked to check that the intent of their comments had been expressed accurately in the assigned codes.

Participants were re-interviewed after a two week period. Consistency in the responses over time would indicate that the findings in the interview were reliable.

The researcher diary entries of students' reactions and responses during each of the conference sessions were to corroborate findings in the follow-up conferences and interviews, leading to greater reliability and validity.

#### ***3.3.4 Ethical issues in the experimental study***

Before the interview, the consent of the student participants was obtained, and they were informed of the general nature of the interview and that they could withdraw at any time

they wanted to. The main aim of the study was clearly explained to the student participants, that is, to enable the teacher-researcher to determine the effectiveness of the different modes of teacher feedback so more effective teaching strategies could be subsequently devised to enhance students' writing competence. In addition, these students were also given the guarantee of their right to anonymity and confidentiality.

### ***3.3.5 Ethics in the semi-structured interviews***

Fraenkel & Wallen (2005) identified three very important issues in relation to ethics in educational research, which were taken into account for this study (2005, p.56). These issues were the protection of participants from harm, ensuring the confidentiality of research data, and the question of deception of subjects. With reference to the research method adopted in the main study, there was no question of harming the student participants in the research nor was there the question of deception of subjects. The subject researcher had made the aims of the research clear to the student participants. In addition, prior consent of the student subjects was obtained before conducting the research, and they were also guaranteed their right to anonymity and confidentiality. To protect students' anonymity, pseudonyms have been used in the transcripts and the findings and discussion chapters of the paper.

### ***3.3.6 Ethics in the follow-up conferences and interviews***

The issue of ethics was also seriously considered prior to the conduct of the two group interviews. The researcher made the aims of the research clear to the student participants. In addition, consent of the student subjects was obtained before conducting the research, and they were also guaranteed their right to anonymity and confidentiality

and their freedom to withdraw from participation in the group interviews at any time. To protect students' anonymity, pseudonyms have been used in the transcripts and the discussion chapter of the paper.

Students were given the opportunity to review and verify the interpretation of their interview data.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

This study required different kinds of analysis for different kinds of data. The following section will outline the statistical procedures adopted in the analysis of numerical data. This will be followed by a discussion of the analysis of the findings of the semi-structured interviews and the interview data of the two group interviews.

#### ***3.4.1 Statistical procedures adopted***

The first statistical procedure concerns the presentation of the basic characteristics of the students such as the number of students involved in each of the experimental and control groups. Marker 1 and Marker 2 marked both the writings of the students in the experimental (17 scripts) and control groups (17 scripts). They then awarded marks on the students' writing based on the same marking scheme. The marks of the two markers were summed up and the average (mean) obtained.

The overall scores of both the experimental and control groups comprise the next set of statistics. The marking scheme (see Appendix 2) for the pilot study was devised with reference to the marking scheme for the writing paper in the public examination, *Advanced Supplementary Level Examination for the Use of English*. Each of the main

criteria, that is, content and grammatical accuracy, was assessed on a nine-point scale. The mean (the sum of the measures divided by the number of measures) and standard deviation (a measure of data variation; the square root of the variance) were calculated to indicate how the data in the sample deviate from the mean.

The paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores (continuous variable) between the pre-test and the post-test, writing tasks, and correction tasks for the same students. The assumptions for paired-samples t-test, such as normal distribution, were tested before conducting the t-test.

The mixed between-within ANOVA were then performed to test whether there are main effects for each of the independent variables and whether the interaction between the two variables is significant.

Pallant (2005, p.241) states that there is a need to satisfy a number of underlying assumptions concerning the use of parametric tests in order to perform the paired-samples t-test and mixed between-within ANOVA. These are presented as follows:

- ◆ Level of Measurement (Type of data)

The mixed between-within ANOVA assumes the dependent variable (type of data) is measured on an interval scale, which uses a continuous scale rather than discrete categories.

- ◆ Random Sampling

The use of paired-samples t-test and mixed between-within ANOVA assumes that the scores are obtained using a random sample from the population.

- ◆ Independence of observations

The observations that make up the data must be independent of one another. Each observation or measurement must not be influenced by any other observation or measurement.

- ◆ Normal distribution

It is assumed that the populations from which the samples are taken are normally distributed. To assess normality, many of the statistical techniques assume that the distribution of scores on the dependent variable is “normal”. Normal is used to “describe a symmetrical, bell-shaped curve, which has the greatest frequency of scores in the middle, with smaller frequencies towards the extremes” (Pallant, 2005, p.53). The Shapiro-Wilk test was performed using SPSS to test the normality of the data.

- ◆ Homogeneity of variance

There is an assumption that samples are obtained from populations of equal variances. This means that the variability of scores is similar for each of the groups. For example, the variances of the scores are the same for experimental group and control group. To test this, Levene’s test for equality of variances with the use of SPSS (Version 15) was conducted as part of the paired-samples t-test and mixed

between-within ANOVA. If a significant value of less than 0.05 is obtained, this suggests that variances for the two groups are not equal, and there is the violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variance. In this study, Levene's test for equality of variances will be used to find whether the variance (variation) of scores for the two groups of students (experimental/control groups) is the same.

An additional assumption is required for mixed between-within ANOVA, that of homogeneity of inter-correlations. This means that the pattern of inter-correlations among the levels of the within-subjects variable for each of the levels of the between-subjects variable is the same. The assumption is tested as part of the analysis, using Box's M statistic. Pallant (2005, p.241) advises that since this statistic is very sensitive, a more conservative alpha level of 0.001 has to be used. For  $p\text{-value} > 0.001$ , the statistic is not significant.

If the assumptions for paired-samples t-test are satisfied, then the paired-samples t-test could be performed to test the mean score for each of the matched pairs (Pallant, 2005, p.241). Each student subject must provide both sets of scores. Other conditions that had to be satisfied in order to perform the paired-samples t-test are one categorical independent variable (in this experiment, at different times, i.e. pre-test and post-test) and one continuous, dependent variable measured on two different occasions or under different conditions.

Two steps are involved in the interpretation of the results of the paired samples t-test. First, there is the need to determine the overall significance by looking at the probability



value in the final column of the output of the paired-samples t-test. If the p-value is substantially smaller than our specified alpha value of 0.05, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores.

Other information such as the test statistics, degrees of freedom (df), and confidence intervals will also be provided by the SPSS output. The test statistics for t-test is a computed quantity used to decide hypothesis tests and df is the number used to calculate an estimate of the population variability. Sprinthall (2000) suggests that a confidence interval (C.I.) can be used to identify a range of possible values that a sample mean may take (p.170-171). It is a statistically defined range of differences between the population means. Although the sample mean is the best point estimate of the true population mean, the latter may be larger or smaller than the sample mean because the error is associated with this estimate. For example, it is expected that 95% of the time, the sample means lie within the 95% confidence interval surrounding the population mean.

The next step is to determine which set of scores is higher before and after the treatment. This is achieved by looking at the printout box labeled “Paired-Samples Test” in the SPSS output. This box displays the mean scores for each of the two sets of scores. If the results show that there is a statistically significant difference between the two sets of scores, it does not tell us the degree of the association between those two sets of scores. To find the relative magnitude between means, an effect size statistic (also known as “strength of association”) is performed. The effect size is defined as “A statistical measure of the strength of an observed difference between groups on a test or other instrument or the strength of an observed relationship between two or more measured

variables” (Gall et al, 2007, p.639). This is a set of statistics that indicates the relative magnitude of the differences between means.

Pallant (2005, p.201) states that there is a number of different effect size statistics, the most common of which is eta squared. Eta squared represents the proportion of variance of the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variable. The values for eta squared can range from 0 to 1. To interpret the strength of eta squared values, the following guidelines can be used (from Cohen, 1988, p.284-288):

.01 = small effect;

.06 = moderate effect; and

.14 = large effect

The eta squared for the paired-samples t-test can be obtained using the following formula:

$$\text{eta squared} = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + N - 1}$$

where t is the test statistics and N is the sample size.

After conducting the paired-samples t-test, a mixed between-within ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean scores (continuous variable) for two different groups of students in two time periods. With reference to Pallant (2005, p.240), three variables are involved in performing a mixed between-within ANOVA: one categorical independent between-subjects variable with two or more levels (experimental group and control

group); one categorical independent within subjects variable with two or more levels (pre-test and post-test); and one continuous dependent variable (scores). This study not only tested whether there was a change in scores over the two time periods (main effect for time) but also compared whether the two interventions helped increase the scores (main effect for group). The results indicate whether the change in scores over time is different for the two groups (interaction effect).

A mixed between-within ANOVA is aimed at finding whether there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for the experimental and control groups in two time periods (i.e. before and after treatment) (Pallant, 2005, p.241).

The descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) for content total, grammar total, and overall total scores for pre-test experimental group, pre-test control group, post-test experimental group, and post-test control group are shown in the SPSS output. Before looking at the main effect, an assessment of the interaction effect to determine if the change in the scores over time is the same for the two different groups (the experimental and control groups) had first to be made. This is indicated in the second set of rows in the “Multivariate Test” table. If the sig. level for Wilks Lambda is greater than alpha level of 0.05, the interaction effect is not statistically significant. On the other hand, if the sig. level for Wilks Lambda is smaller than the alpha level of 0.05, the interaction effect is statistically significant.

The next step was to assess the main effect for each of the independent variables. For  $p\text{-value} < 0.05$ , the main effect is significant. The effect size can also be obtained by

referring to the last column of Partial Eta Squared of the table “Multivariate Tests Output Box” (based on the guidelines proposed by Cohen, 1988, p.284-288 with 0.01 = small effect; 0.06 = moderate effect; 0.14 = large effect).

After exploring the within-subjects effect, the main effect of the between-subjects variable is considered. The result of the between-subjects effect is shown in the table labeled Tests of Between-subjects Effects.

### ***3.4.2 Content analysis for semi-structured interview***

The interviews were transcribed, analysed and coded. The students’ responses were coded according to how positive, neutral or negative they were about types of feedback and English writing in general. Common themes were identified through the analysis, with the information obtained categorized according to the following headings; namely (1) students’ reactions to the different modes of writing feedback, (2) means of enhancing the effectiveness of English teachers’ comments and students’ revisions, and (3) feasibility of enhancing student interest in learning English through improvement in writing ability. Findings were then summarised.

### ***3.4.3 Content analysis for group interviews and teacher conference diaries***

The interviews were transcribed and coded with the same headings used in the earlier interviews. From the coded units of meaning, themes emerged, which would either support or contradict those which emerged from the individual semi-structured interviews. The teacher journal entries were compared with these themes, again with a view to finding corroboration, or contradictions with the general trends in the earlier data.

In each interview set, the participants were asked to corroborate the themes and the overall tally of positive and negative comments for the coded and analysed transcripts.

# Chapter 4

## 4. FINDINGS

This chapter details the results of the various aspects of the research project. Section 4.1 gives the findings for the pilot study, while the results for the main study are in 4.2. An outline of students' responses and emerging themes in the semi-structured interviews are in 4.3, and an outline of students' responses and emerging themes in the group interviews are in 4.4. The diary notes of the researcher in the conferences are used to validate students' responses in the group interviews in 4.5. A comparison of the findings in the semi-structured and group interviews is made in 4.6. A summary in relation to the core hypothesis and research questions is presented in 4.7.

### 4.1 Pilot study

#### *4.1.1 Presentation of the findings of the pilot study*

Table 1 indicates the mean scores for both groups on the content, accuracy, and total score in each test including redrafts or correction tasks. For the control group, the mean scores on the content and total score increased in redrafts. However, the mean score on accuracy decreased for redrafts. For the experimental group, the mean scores increased for all components of redrafts.

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics of the scores for the different tests for the control group, experimental group, and the average score for the two groups.

	Content	Accuracy	Total
<b>Control Group (N = 4)</b>		<b>Mean (SD)</b>	
Pre-test	5.3 (0.96)	4.6 (0.75)	9.9 (1.44)
Writing 1	5.1 (0.85)	5.4 (0.48)	10.5 (1.00)
Writing 1 Correction	5.3 (0.65)	4.8 (0.29)	10.0 (0.82)
Writing 2	5.3 (0.50)	5.0 (0.71)	10.3 (1.04)
Writing 2 Correction	5.5 (0.58)	4.9 (0.48)	10.4 (0.85)
Post-test	5.5 (0.41)	4.5 (0.41)	10.0 (0.82)
<b>Experimental group (N = 4)</b>		<b>Mean (SD)</b>	
Pre-test	5.1 (0.63)	5.0 (0.71)	10.1 (1.25)
Writing 1	5.4 (0.75)	4.8 (0.50)	10.1 (1.18)
Writing 1 Correction	5.8 (0.50)	5.4 (0.63)	11.1 (1.11)
Writing 2	5.4 (0.48)	5.3 (0.50)	10.6 (0.48)
Writing 2 Correction	5.9 (0.25)	6.0 (0.82)	11.9 (0.85)
Post-test	6.0 (0.82)	6.0 (0.82)	12.0 (1.41)

To find whether there is improvement from pre-test to post-test, writing 1 to writing 1 redraft or correction, and writing 2 to writing 2 redraft or correction, a paired-samples t-test was run to measure and compare statistically the results of student performance in each of the groups.

The null hypothesis states that there is no difference in the mean scores between the pre-test and post-test. If the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected at the 5% level. It can then be concluded that the mean scores between the two tests is significantly different.

As shown in Table 2, the p-values in control group are all greater than 0.05. The null hypothesis of the scores before and after the treatment was not rejected at the 5% level.

There is no significant difference in the scores before and after the treatment in the control group. On the other hand, the p-values in the experimental group are all less than 0.05. This indicates that there is significant difference in the scores before and after the treatment for this group. The increase in the post-test scores for the experimental group students certainly indicated that it was worth continuing with the main study. Moreover, the pilot sample size was small ( $n = 8$ ), and only lasted four weeks. So further investigation using a bigger sample size ( $n = 34$ ) was warranted to find if there are statistically significant differences in the students' performance between the pre-test and post-test due to the different treatments they received. In the pilot study, 6 tests (pre-test, writing 1, writing 1 redraft or correction, writing 2, writing 2 redraft or correction and post-test) were conducted with 8 students (4 each in the experimental group and control groups). In the main study, 4 more writing tasks (writing 3, writing 3 redraft or correction, writing 4, writing 4 redraft or correction) were conducted. The main study involved 34 students (17 each in the experimental and control groups).

**Table 2** Comparisons of the scores before and after each correction among the different test groups using the paired-samples t-test

	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
<b>Control Group</b>					
Pre-test — post-test	1.25	1.18	0.21	3	0.846
Writing 1 — Correction 1	-0.50	1.29	-0.78	3	0.495
Writing 2 — Correction 2	0.13	0.85	0.29	3	0.789
<b>Experimental Group</b>					
Pre-test — post-test	1.88	1.48	7.83	3	0.004
Writing 1 — Correction 1	1.00	0.41	4.90	3	0.016
Writing 2 — Correction 2	1.25	0.50	5.00	3	0.015



#### ***4.1.2 Revision in the marking scheme after the pilot study***

After the pilot, the teachers who marked the scripts suggested a revision of the marking scheme as the two categories, content and grammatical accuracy, were too broad. They recommended a marking scheme with more criteria and detailed band descriptors to allow a more comprehensive measure of student performance. A more comprehensive and detailed marking scheme was subsequently devised based on the evaluation guide in the works of Hughey et al (1983, p.30) (see Appendix 4).

#### **4.2 Main study**

The main study comprised two groups, the experimental and control groups, with 17 students in each group. For each writing and redraft (correction) task including the pre-test and post-test, the two evaluators graded the students' writing for the experimental and control groups using the marking scheme in Appendix 4. The marks of the two evaluators were added and averaged (mean). The mean scores for the tests before and after treatment were compared.

By comparing each test with the respective correction task, both mean scores and their components were found to have increased. Moreover, the mean scores on content, grammar and total score increased from pre-test to post-test. Therefore, there is improvement in the scores after correction for all students.

The Shapiro-Wilk test was performed using SPSS to test the normality for the scores in the different tests. The test statistics and degree of freedom are also shown in the table in Appendix 6. The null hypothesis states that the data followed normal distribution.

Since most p-values from the results are greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected at 5% significant level. Therefore, the data followed normal distribution. Since the assumption has been fulfilled, the difference between pre-test and post-test can then be compared statistically using the paired-samples t-test.

To determine whether the experimental group and control group improved before and after each correction, pre-test, and post-test, the paired-samples t-test was run to measure and compare statistically the results of student performance in each of the groups (see Table 3).

The null hypothesis states that there is no difference in the mean scores between the pre-test and post-test, writing tasks, and correction tasks. If the p-value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected at the 5% level. It can then be concluded that the mean scores between the two tests are significantly different.

**Table 3** Comparisons of the scores before and after each correction or redraft for the two test groups using the paired-samples t-test

	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	p-value
Pre — Post-test Content Total	3.56	2.75	7.56	33	< 0.001
Pre — Post-test Grammar Total	3.76	2.83	7.76	33	< 0.001
Pre — Post-test Overall Score	7.32	5.38	7.94	33	< 0.001
Writing 1 — Content Total	2.97	2.12	8.15	33	< 0.001
Writing 1 — Correction Content Total					
Writing 1 — Grammar Total	3.12	1.87	9.74	33	< 0.001
Writing 1 — Correction Grammar Total					
Writing 1 — Over Score	6.09	3.77	9.42	33	< 0.001
Writing 1 — Correction Overall Score					
Writing 2 — Content Total	3.34	2.46	7.92	33	< 0.001
Writing 2 — Correction Content Total					
Writing 2 — Grammar Total	3.26	2.43	7.82	33	< 0.001
Writing 2 — Correction Grammar Total					

<b>Writing 2 – Over Score</b>	6.60	4.78	8.06	33	< 0.001
<b>Writing 2 – Correction Overall Score</b>					
<b>Writing 3 – Content Total</b>	2.97	2.18	7.96	33	< 0.001
<b>Writing 3 – Correction Content Total</b>					
<b>Writing 3 – Grammar Total</b>	2.53	1.68	8.79	33	< 0.001
<b>Writing 3 – Correction Grammar Total</b>					
<b>Writing 3 – Over Score</b>	5.50	3.52	9.11	33	< 0.001
<b>Writing 3 – Correction Overall Score</b>					
<b>Writing 4 – Content Total</b>	2.84	2.27	7.30	33	< 0.001
<b>Writing 4 – Correction Content Total</b>					
<b>Writing 4 – Grammar Total</b>	2.97	1.78	9.74	33	< 0.001
<b>Writing 4 – Correction Grammar Total</b>					
<b>Writing 4 – Over Score</b>	5.81	3.87	8.75	33	< 0.001
<b>Writing 4 – Correction Overall Score</b>					

Table 3 shows the comparisons of the total content score, total grammar score and total overall scores before and after each correction among the different test groups using the paired-samples t-test. The difference in the mean scores, standard deviation, 95% confidence interval of the difference, t-statistics, degree of freedom, and p-value are shown in the table. Since all the p-values are less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected at the 5% level. The mean total scores increased significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) from the pre-test to post-test and from each writing task to each correction task, respectively.

To find the magnitude of the differences in the means, the following calculation on eta squared between the difference in the pre-test and post-test was performed using the

$$\text{equation eta squared} = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + N - 1}$$

$$\text{For the content total score, eta squared} = \frac{(7.56)^2}{(7.56)^2 + 34 - 1} = 0.634; \text{ for the grammar total}$$

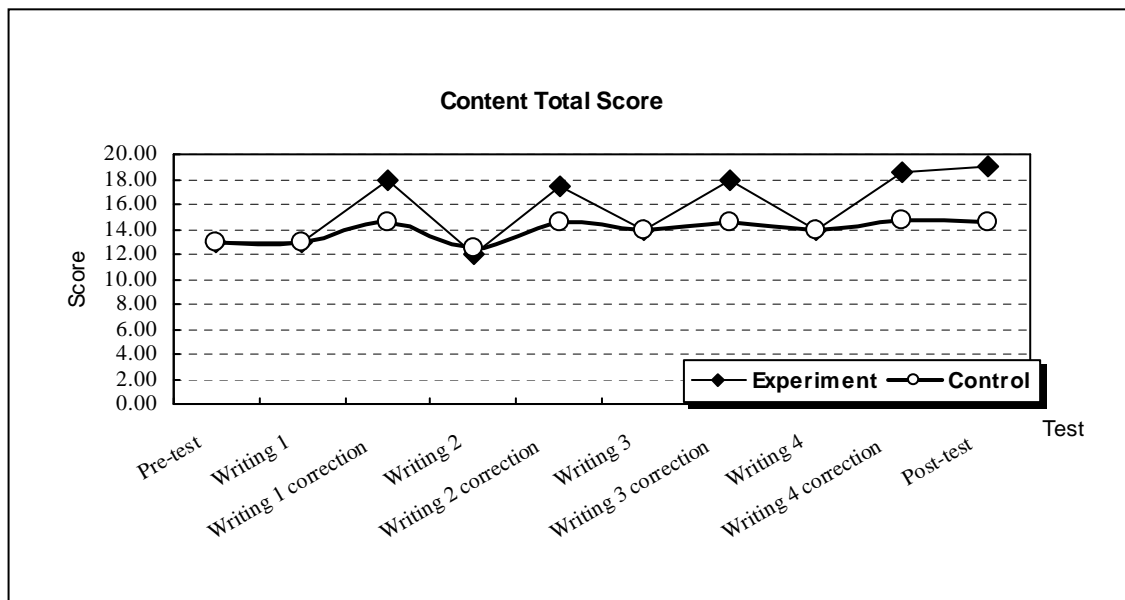
$$\text{score, eta squared} = \frac{(7.76)^2}{(7.76)^2 + 34 - 1} = 0.646; \text{ and for the overall total score, eta squared}$$

$$= \frac{(7.94)^2}{(7.94)^2 + 34 - 1} = 0.656$$

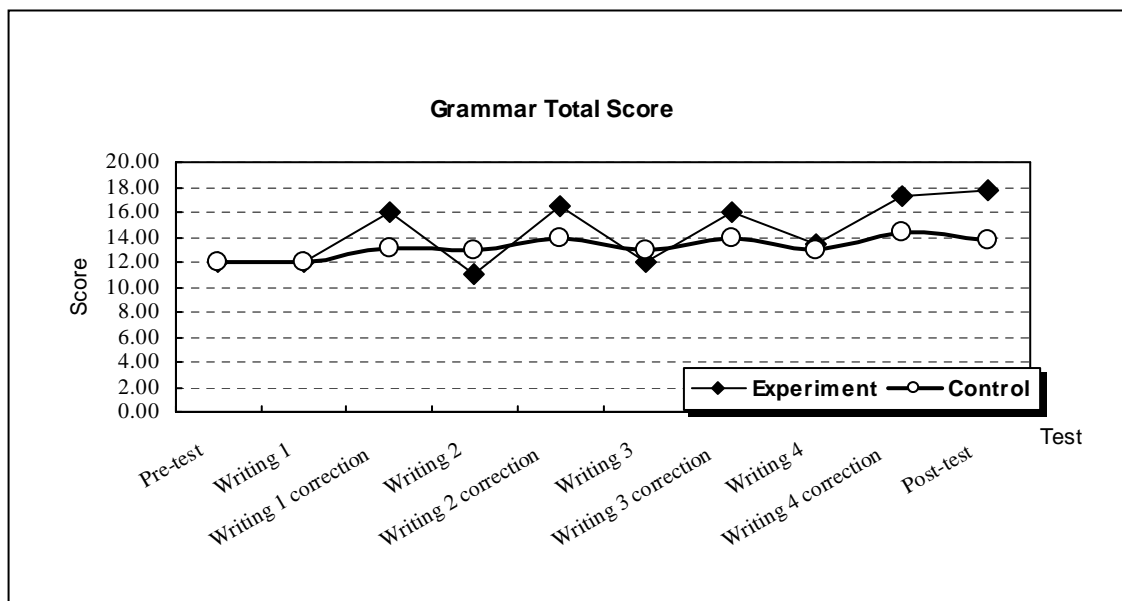
According to the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988, p.284-288), 0.01 = small effect; 0.06 = moderate effect; 0.14 = large effect, this shows that there was a large effect with a substantial difference in the scores obtained from the post-test between the two groups. The magnitude of the difference in the means was very large (eta squared > 0.14). The eta squared for writing 1 to 4 and correction 1 to 4 was also calculated, and it was found that the magnitude of the differences in the means for each pair of tests was very large (eta squared > 0.14).

The differences in content total, grammar total and overall total scores between the experimental and the control groups are presented graphically as follows:

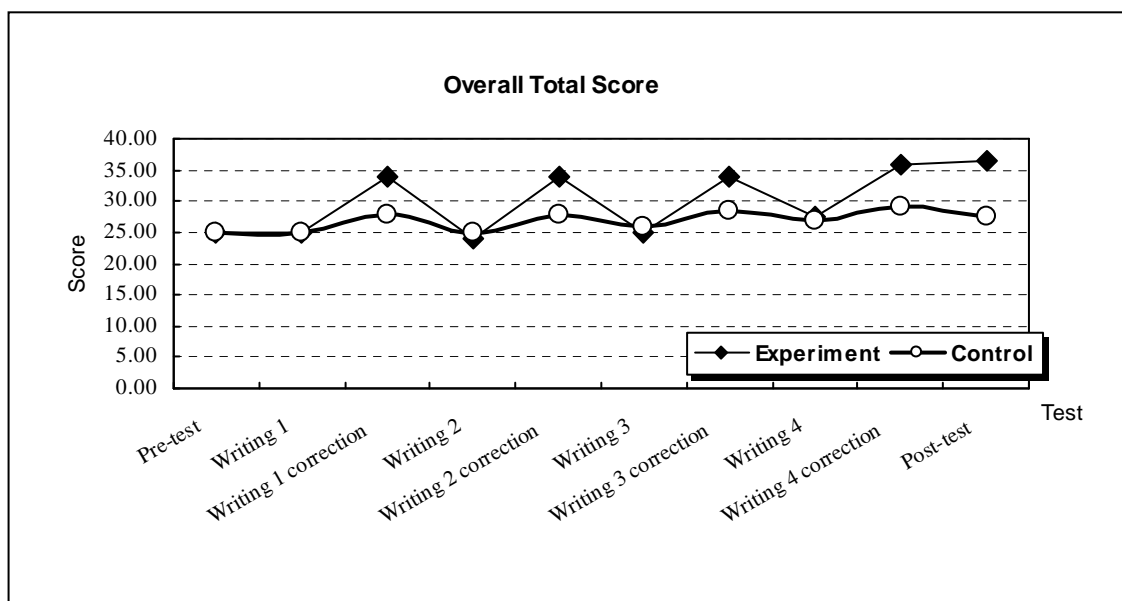
**Figure 1** Total content scores in the different tests among the different test groups



**Figure 2** Total grammar scores in the different tests among the different test groups



**Figure 3** Overall scores in the different tests among the different test groups



As Figures 1 to 3 show, the scores of the experimental and control groups are similar in the pre-test, writing 1, writing 2, writing 3, and writing 4. However, the scores in the experimental group are higher than those in the control group in the post-test, writing 1 redraft, writing 2 redraft, writing 3 redraft and writing 4 redraft.

Table 4 shows the mean content scores, grammar scores, and overall scores in the different tests for the two groups. Most of the differences between the scores of the experimental and control groups are close to 0 in the pre-test, writing 1, writing 2, writing 3, and writing 4. This indicates that the scores are similar for the experimental and control group before the treatment. However, there are differences in the post-test, writing 1 redraft, writing 2 redraft, writing 3 redraft, and writing 4 redraft. This shows that the scores in the experimental group are higher than those of the control group after the treatment.

**Table 4** Overall scores and the differences in different tests between the two test groups

		Content Total	Grammar Total	Overall Scores
<b>Pre-test</b>	Experimental (N = 17)	13.1	11.8	24.8
	Control (N = 17)	13.2	12.1	25.3
	Difference	-0.1	-0.3	-0.5
<b>Writing 1</b>	Experimental (N = 17)	13.1	11.6	24.6
	Control (N = 17)	13.2	11.9	25.1
	Difference	-0.1	-0.3	-0.5
<b>Writing 1 Correction</b>	Experimental (N = 17)	17.7	16.1	33.8
	Control (N = 17)	14.6	13.6	28.2
	Difference	3.1	2.5	5.6
<b>Writing 2</b>	Experimental (N = 17)	12.2	11.3	23.5
	Control (N = 17)	12.8	12.6	25.4
	Difference	-0.6	-1.3	-1.9
<b>Writing 2 Correction</b>	Experimental (N = 17)	17.4	16.5	34.0
	Control (N = 17)	14.2	13.9	28.1
	Difference	3.2	2.6	5.9
<b>Writing 3</b>	Experimental (N = 17)	13.1	12.3	25.4
	Control (N = 17)	13.5	12.7	26.2
	Difference	-0.4	-0.4	-0.8
<b>Writing 3 Correction</b>	Experimental (N = 17)	17.9	15.9	33.8
	Control (N = 17)	14.7	14.1	28.8
	Difference	3.2	1.5	5.0

<b>Writing 4</b>	Experimental (N = 17)	14.1	13.1	27.2
	Control (N = 17)	13.9	12.9	26.7
	Difference	0.2	0.2	0.5
<b>Writing 4 Correction</b>	Experimental (N = 17)	18.7	17.4	36.1
	Control (N = 17)	14.9	14.5	29.4
	Difference	3.8	2.9	6.7
<b>Post-test</b>	Experimental (N = 17)	18.9	17.7	36.6
	Control (N = 17)	14.5	13.7	28.2
	Difference	4.4	4.0	8.4

To test whether the scores are significantly different between experimental and control groups over time, a mixed between-within ANOVA was then used. The descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) for the content, grammar, and overall total scores for the experimental group and control group's pre and post-tests are shown in Table 5. The mean score for the post-test experimental group is the highest compared with the other three groups.

**Table 5** Descriptive statistics for the mixed between-within ANOVA

		<b>Content Total</b>		<b>Grammar Total</b>		<b>Overall Total</b>	
		<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Pre-test</b>							
	<b>Overall</b>						
	<b>Score</b>						
	Experimental	13.06	1.29	11.76	1.46	24.82	2.62
	Control	13.18	1.47	12.12	1.04	25.29	2.24
<b>Post-test</b>							
	<b>Overall</b>						
	<b>Score</b>						
	Experimental	18.85	2.06	17.74	1.65	36.59	3.41
	Control	14.50	1.77	13.68	1.70	28.18	3.33

A test on the homogeneity of variance is required before performing the mixed between-within ANOVA. Levene's Test for equality of variances was performed, with the results shown in Table 6. The null hypothesis states that the error variance of the

dependent variable is equal across all groups. The results show all the p-values  $> 0.05$ ; therefore the null hypothesis is not rejected at the 5% level. This shows that the variance is the same across groups. Therefore, the assumption of mixed between-within ANOVA is fulfilled and the difference between experimental and control groups can be compared using mixed between-within ANOVA. Another assumption is the homogeneity of inter-correlation; which can be tested using Box's M statistics. The results show all the p-values  $> 0.05$ ; therefore, the null hypothesis is not rejected at the 5% level. This shows that for each group, the pattern of inter-correlation between the pre-test and the post-test is the same. Hence, mixed between-within ANOVA can be used to compare the difference between two groups over time.

**Table 6** *Test for assumptions for the mixed between-within ANOVA*

	Box's M test		Leven's Test for Pre-test		Levene's Test for Post-test	
	Value	P-value	F-value	P-value	F-value	P-value
<b>Content Total</b>	1.022	0.813	0.668	0.420	0.321	0.575
<b>Grammar Total</b>	4.119	0.279	1.170	0.288	0.010	0.920
<b>Overall Score</b>	1.332	0.743	0.363	0.551	0.031	0.862

To assess the interaction effect, it is necessary to observe whether there is the same change in scores over time for the two different groups (experimental and control groups). As shown in Table 7, the p-value for Wilks Lambda is  $< 0.05$ , suggesting that the interaction effect is statistically significant. It also indicates that the change in scores over time for the two groups is different.



The main effect for each of our independent variables was assessed. Since all the  $p$ -values  $< 0.05$ , the main effect for time is statistically significant at the 5% level. This shows that there is a change in scores between the pre-test and post-test. The result shows that the scores in the post-test are significantly higher than the scores in the pre-test. To find the magnitude of the differences in the means, the effect size was also assessed. All the values of partial eta squared shown in the last column of Table 7 are greater than 0.14. According to the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988, p.284-288), 0.01 = small effect; 0.06 = moderate effect; 0.14 = large effect, the results suggest a very large effect size.

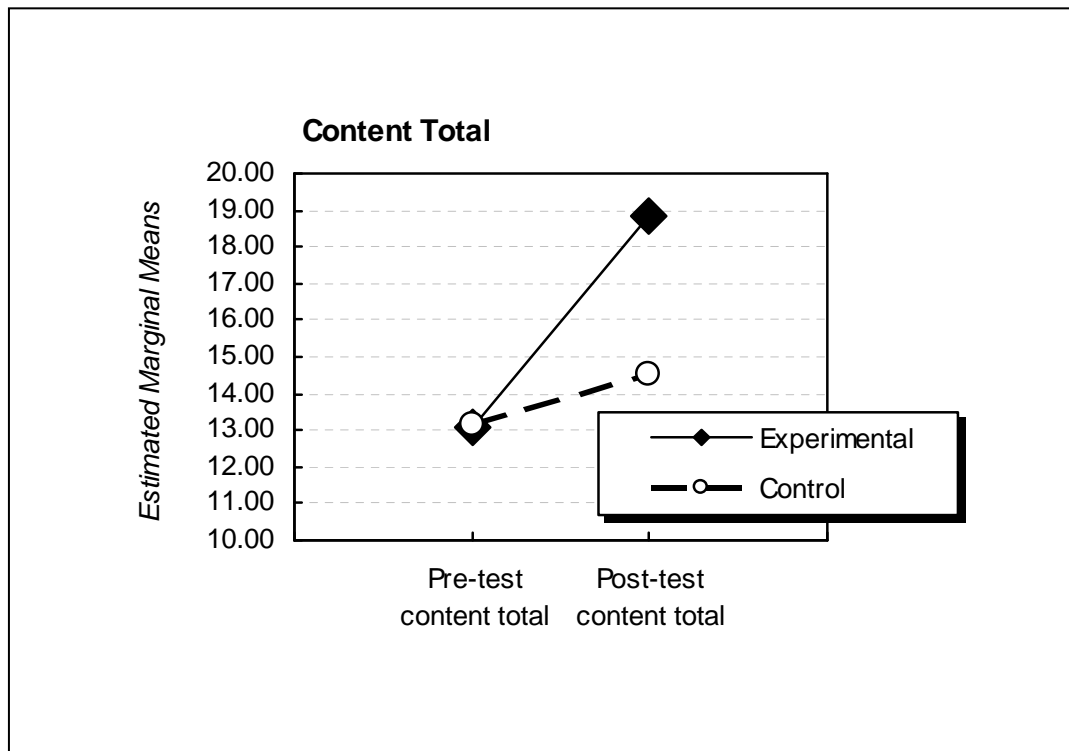
**Table 7** Comparisons of the scores for the pre-test and post-test among the different test groups using mixed between-within ANOVA

		Wilks' Lambda			
		Value	F-value	P-value	Partial Eta Squared
<b>Content Total</b>	Within-subjects Effect (Pre/post-test)	0.155	174.427	$< 0.001$	0.845
	Interaction Effect (Pre/post-test* group)	0.317	68.813	$< 0.001$	0.683
	Between-subjects Effect (group)		17.514	$< 0.001$	0.354
<b>Grammar Total</b>	Within-subjects Effect (Pre/post-test)	0.170	156.271	$< 0.001$	0.830
	Interaction Effect (Pre/post-test* group)	0.374	53.651	$< 0.001$	0.626
	Between-subjects Effect (group)		20.299	$< 0.001$	0.388
<b>Overall Total</b>	Within-subjects Effect (Pre/post-test)	0.135	205.599	$< 0.001$	0.865
	Interaction Effect (Pre/post-test* group)	0.297	75.610	$< 0.001$	0.703
	Between-subjects Effect (group)		20.833	$< 0.001$	0.394

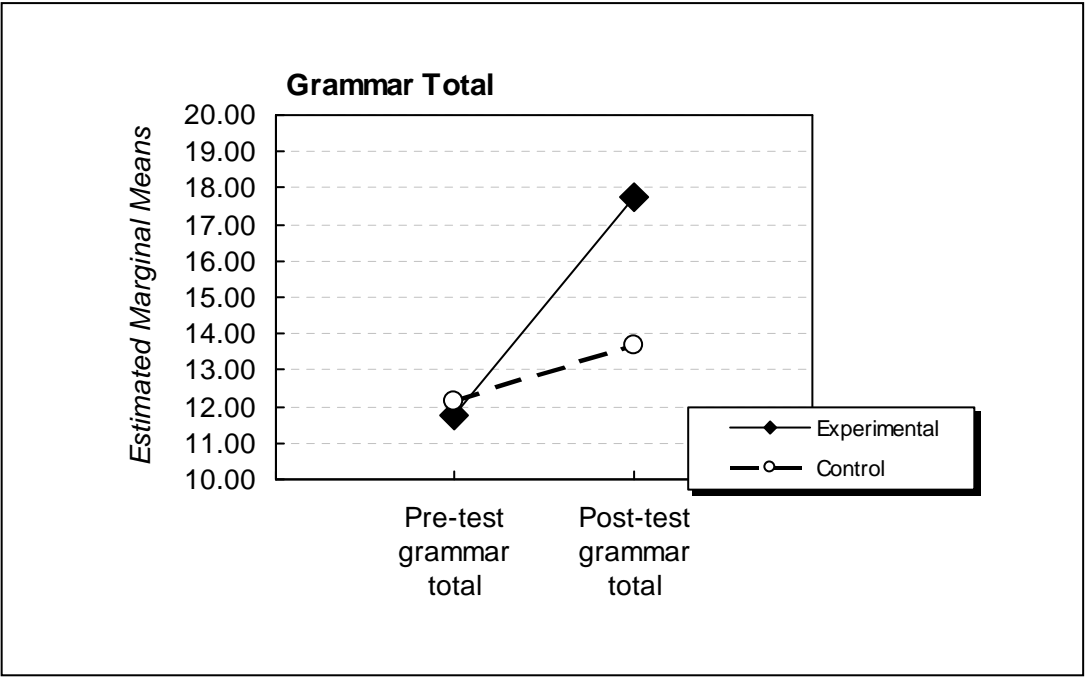
As for the results assessing the between-subjects effect, since all  $p$ -values  $< 0.05$ , the main effect for the group is significant at the 5% level. This suggests that there are statistically significant differences in the scores between the experimental and control groups. The result shows that the scores in the experimental group are significantly higher than the scores in the control group. The effect size is also given in Table 7. All the values of partial eta squared are greater than 0.14 (with reference to the guidelines proposed by Cohen, 1988, p.284-288, 0.01 = small effect; 0.06 = moderate effect; 0.14 = large effect), suggesting a very large effect size.

The changes in the main effects and interaction effects are presented as follows:

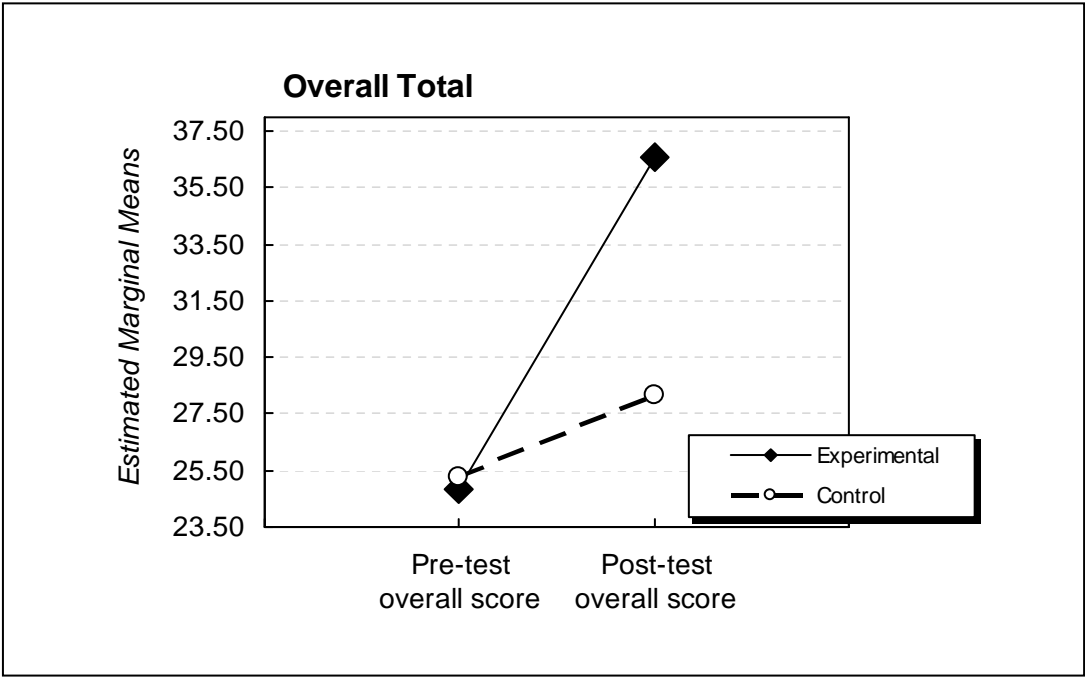
**Figure 4** The plot of content total against the different tests for the two groups



**Figure 5**    *The plot of grammar total against the different tests for the two groups*



**Figure 6**    *The plot of overall total against the different tests for the two groups*



The scores in both the experimental and the control groups increase over time. Figures 4-6 show that improvement in scores of the experimental group students is higher than for the control group. The results in mixed between-within ANOVA show that the differences in scores over time and between the two groups are statistically significant. Hence, the scores of the experimental group students are significantly higher than the scores of the control group students, showing that students who engaged in teacher-student conferencing were able to make greater progress in their writing than those who experienced only written feedback.

#### **4.3 Semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the main study. There were 3 students in the experimental group, Harry, Carrie, and Sam. Harry had scored the highest mark, Carrie the average mark, and Sam the lowest mark in the post-test. There were 3 students in the control group, Alice, Ricky, and Betty. Alice had scored the highest mark, Ricky, the average mark, and Betty, the lowest mark in the post-test. These are all pseudonyms to protect students' anonymity. The interview data were transcribed and analysed in terms of the aims of this study. Transcripts are presented in the addenda.

The first aim of the study was to determine students' responses toward the different modes of feedback, namely, written feedback and teacher-student conferencing. When students were asked how they felt when marked writing was returned by teachers, students from both the experimental and control groups generally had little confidence in obtaining good marks for their writing. A negative feeling was typical regardless of students' language proficiency. For example, Harry, the best performing student in the

experimental group, said he would try to “escape from reality and just ignore the whole thing” when he received negative comments for his work. Harry also commented that he seldom received praise from the teacher for the work done. Similarly, Ricky, the average student in the control group said he often felt disappointed when his writing was returned because there were red marks all over the paper and he wondered “why the mark is so low or why the writing has so many mistakes”. Betty in the control group said that she had no special feeling when her writing was returned to her but generally expressions such as “disappointed” are recurrent in the interview data, with no reports of positive reactions.

Responses among students in both groups were similar in that students said that written feedback is useful but not adequate to help them to do corrections and avoid making similar mistakes in the future. However, it is interesting to note that only one of the three students who received verbal feedback gave any positive comments about written feedback whereas the three students in the control group receiving only written feedback expressed some positive comments about written feedback with Alice mentioning positive comments about written feedback twice, Ricky five times and Betty once.

The difference in the responses between both groups may be attributed to the fact that students in the experimental and control groups received different treatments in the study. Students receiving verbal feedback in the experimental group could conceivably be more aware of the inadequacies of written feedback because they were exposed to verbal feedback which students in the other group did not experience. For example, Harry, in the experimental group, said that although he found the teacher comment useful, he was not entirely satisfied with the way comments were given to him. First of all, he said that

the written comments were insufficient to help him understand the mistakes he made. He commented that teachers “never point out all mistakes. Maybe there is not much space on the paper, teacher cannot write many sentences”. Another dissatisfaction was that the teacher only identified the weaknesses in his writing without giving him any praise: “They just tell me what I should improve, and never praise me. They just pointed out the problems I must solve”. Similar views were shared by the other two students in the group. Carrie mentioned that the written feedback she received from her teacher was inadequate to help her solve problems in the structure of her writing. Sam commented that he did not receive a lot of comments from his teachers and that the mistakes in his writing were often indicated with the use of error codes, such as codes indicating wrong spelling. However, he found the use of error codes very confusing as there were so many of them and that “he did not know what the teachers talking about”.

Meanwhile students in the control group, who received only written feedback in the study, seemed to give a stronger endorsement of written feedback, in spite of some of the identified shortcomings. For example, when Alice was asked if the written feedback from her teacher helped her to make improvement in terms of her writing ability, she said that she would remember the written feedback of the teacher and she put the blame for not being able to make improvement in her writing on the lack of frequent writing practice. In the same way, Ricky, in the same group, commented that he found the written feedback for his writing useful although not enough: “Although some feedback is quite short indeed, some is quite clear by pointing out what problems I had in my essay, but the feedback is not detailed enough”. The failure of written feedback to provide sufficient

feedback for corrections emerged from student responses in both experimental and control groups, although the number of references to the same theme in the experimental group was somewhat higher than in the control group.

When students in the experimental and control groups were asked how they attempted to do the corrections based on the teacher feedback, it emerged that students with a higher level of English proficiency tended to cope with their problems on their own whereas weaker students were more prepared to seek help from others; sometimes their teacher if the teacher was nearby, or from peers. Harry, in the experimental group, said he would not seek help from his teachers because they were often too busy to help him solve his problems. His classmates would not be of much help to him either because “they are not often sure if they are correct or not”. The strategies he adopted to help him do his corrections were to look up dictionaries, visit libraries or to surf the internet. In the same way, Alice, the most proficient student in the control group, also said that she would not approach the teacher for explanations about her mistakes: “I go over the essay and if I don’t know how to do the corrections, I will just leave it and will not seek help from the teacher”. Other students in the experimental group were more prepared to seek help from classmates or/and teachers if they still had problems with their corrections. Carrie said she would consult reference books and dictionaries before seeking help from classmates or teachers. The difficulty of asking teachers for direct and individual input was a repeated theme, with students identifying teachers’ workloads and the number of students needing assistance as factors.

In contrast, students remarked that within the conferencing context, they would willingly ask their teacher for explanations or advice. Sam said he would take the initiative to ask teachers for explanations of his mistakes as this would help him avoid making similar mistakes in the future. Similarly, Ricky and Betty identified issues they would ask about if they had the opportunity. Betty, for example, said that she would ask her teacher many questions about writing, for example, “the use of tenses, because I always make mistakes about using the wrong tenses”. She continued to say that it would be very difficult for her to do corrections without the teacher first explaining her mistakes. The eagerness of students to have individual attention, including extended explanations, in contrast to their perception of the impracticality of teachers’ giving individual attention to students were prominent themes in the interview data.

Regarding students’ views on ways to enhance the effectiveness of writing teachers’ commentaries, responses showed that students in the experimental and control groups appreciated verbal feedback. Students’ preference for verbal feedback is reflected in the tallying for comments for each of the students in the experimental group with Harry mentioning the advantages of providing students with verbal feedback three times, Carrie six times and Sam three times, outweighing their positive comments about written feedback in each case. This might be due to the fact that these students all received verbal feedback in the study and they actually experienced how attention to individual students could help to solve their individual problems and help to improve their writing ability. Harry claimed he would be able to make greater progress in writing if his teacher could verbally remind him of the problems he had to solve in his writing: “I think



more improvement will be shown if the teachers remind me what problems I have to solve”. Carrie, the average student in the experimental group, shared Harry’s view. She said that verbal feedback was beneficial in that it could help students perform better according to their varied learning abilities and the teacher could also motivate students to learn English: “Verbal feedback can encourage students to put more effort on writing because not only can it give students a chance to ask questions, but also it can help to increase their motivation in learning English as it can give teachers a good chance to care and cater to the needs of each student who has different ability”. Sam, the student with the lowest score in the post-test, was more positive about written feedback than Harry and Carrie, saying that he thought both written feedback and verbal feedback were useful to him. He said written feedback was useful because the teacher could indicate to him the mistakes he made in his writing. However, he found that written feedback was inadequate to meet his needs because he thought the interaction between teacher and student was very important. Sharing Carrie’s view, he said that he would like to have teacher-student conferencing because he could be motivated to learn better if given the chance to interact with the teacher on an individual basis and be given words of encouragement.

Echoing the views of students in the experimental group, students in the control group also expressed their preferences for verbal feedback although they had not had the chance to receive verbal feedback in the study. These students still mentioned the advantages of having verbal feedback, with Alice mentioning it twice, Ricky four times and Betty five times. While Alice and Ricky spoke positively about written and verbal feedback a

similar number of times, they did not articulate any negatives about verbal feedback which they did with written feedback. Betty was, however, way more positive about verbal feedback than about written feedback.

Most of the reasons students in the control group gave were in general similar to those in the experimental group. For example, Alice said that verbal feedback could cater better for individual differences as “it is difficult to give individual attention in class because students are of mixed ability”. Betty, the student with the lowest score in the control group, expressed views similar to that of her classmates, that is, individual response on a one-to-one basis could help students do better writing. She even quoted an anecdote to support her claim that individual feedback was more useful to her than written feedback:

*I remember that when I was in Form 4 and 5, some of my classmates' English were quite good and the teacher paid more attention to these students (explaining mistakes to them after class). The students with poor English were neglected. As a result, students who obtained extra attention from the teacher were able to make greater progress than she did.*

In addition to the common theme of students in both the experimental and control groups preferring verbal feedback, there was the additional issue that some students also wanted attention on content as well as form. This desire for teacher feedback on content and form is evident in the interview data for students in the experimental group, with Harry mentioning it three times in the interview, Carrie and Sam twice respectively. Harry said in the interview that he would appreciate more input on his work in progress, that is, his

emphasis was in the process of writing more so than the product. He said that he would like the teacher to go through his writing with him and tell him which were the parts that he had written well and which parts needed improvement. He commented that the conference context could enable him to ask help from the teacher to help him generate more ideas for his writing: “My teacher can say: ‘This bit is good. This bit is not good’. I can ask for ideas. I can ask the teacher to explain and show me an example”. The desire for attention to content and form is also noticeably among students in the control group. For example, Ricky said that teachers should place equal emphasis on content and grammar in feedback: “Focus more on content and provide guidance as to how to develop the content of the piece of writing”. He then commented that it would not be much help to him if the content of his writing was irrelevant to the topic and the teacher instead just underlined the grammatical mistakes in his writing. More useful to him would be to have an opportunity for the teacher to explain to him the reasons why the content of his writing was irrelevant to the topic: “If the content of the piece of writing is irrelevant to the topic, I would like the teacher to suggest to me how to correct my essay so as to make it relevant to the topic I was asked to write on”.

Regarding the last aim of the study, whether students’ interest in learning English can be enhanced by improving their writing abilities, students in both groups generally agreed that more individual attention from the teacher would enhance their writing ability, and that higher marks in their writing would better motivate them to learn English. Harry, an experimental group student, commented that verbal feedback from the teacher would help him improve more in his writing and arouse his interest in learning English. Carrie

and Sam in the experimental group also commented that verbal feedback can encourage students to put more effort into writing. They considered the chance to get help on individual mistakes and problems as the kind of affective support that students need to feel motivated to improve their writing ability.

Students in the control group shared the views of students in the experimental group. Alice, said that improvement in writing ability could help to enhance her interest in learning English: “I think so. I can enjoy a great sense of success; this will help to build up my confidence in learning English”. Ricky concurred. However, he further explained that improvement in writing ability would help to build up his confidence in using English in his everyday life to communicate with foreigners. This would further arouse his interest in learning English. When he was asked to explain how individual teacher feedback could help him develop his interest in writing, he said that the teacher could teach him how to improve the content of his writing:

*If I can write English, I will be able to speak the language. Then I can use English to communicate with foreigners and I'll do more with the English language. After all, English is so vital in Hong Kong. I'd prefer one-to-one guidance because I can have interaction with the teacher and the teacher can help me with the content of my writing.*

When Betty was asked whether improved writing ability could enhance her interest in learning English, she responded that this would certainly help her to build up her confidence in learning English. If she could get good marks in her writing, she would be

more interested to read more and would be more willing to turn to her teacher for help if she had problems with her writing.

A further theme which emerged from the interview data, as indicated above, was that students were aware of the impracticality of teachers' giving individual attention to students because of their busy time schedule. Although students indicated their preference for individual attention from the teacher, they were all aware that this might not be feasible in view of the number of students in the class, the heavy workload and the busy schedule of teachers. Harry, for example, mentioned that his teacher often provided him with written feedback and seldom verbal feedback because if he were to be given verbal feedback, then the teacher would have to provide verbal feedback to all students and the teacher would not be able to manage providing verbal feedback to all students.

Similarly, Carrie also commented that although she preferred verbal feedback, she was aware that it would be difficult because teachers were very busy and they could not afford the time to give individual attention to students: "However, I understand teachers are very busy. They won't have the time to provide individual feedback to students". Ricky also said that it would be difficult for him to seek individual help from the teacher because they are often very busy and he would have to turn to his classmates for help if he had problems with doing the corrections in his writing: "... teachers are often very busy and it will be impossible for them to cater for the needs of so many students".

Another theme which emerged from the interviews is that students seem dissatisfied with the feedback on writing currently provided for them with the focus on form rather than content. Students in the interviews were aware of the benefits of written feedback, but they were not satisfied that there was scant attention to the content or structure of the writing. One of the students mentioned that she could cope with correcting spelling and grammatical mistakes in her writing, but she wanted more teacher comment on how to improve the content of her writing. This same sentiment is reflected in Ricky's comment that he wanted feedback to "focus more on content and provide guidance as to how to develop the content of the piece of writing".

It has been noted that students in general found some written comments useful for them, in spite of the limitations they identified. Some students indicated that it would be helpful if an integrated approach were adopted in the provision of feedback to the students. For example, Sam in the experimental group said he found both written feedback and verbal feedback useful to him, although he preferred verbal feedback. Nonetheless, he still thought it was useful to get written feedback as this would help him with his grammar. In fact, he suggested that teachers could provide students with both verbal and written feedback for their writing:

Sam: I think both of them [verbal and written feedback] are useful. But for me I will rather choose the verbal feedback.

Teacher: ... Can you tell me why you think written feedback is useful? In what ways?

Sam: .... in the comment, most of the teachers will write about what mistakes you have in the grammatical ways, such as structural, sentence structure, grammar etc. So I think it is still useful but not enough.

Teacher: So can you tell me why teacher-student conferencing is a better way of giving feedback?

Sam: It is very important because at least I can ask, and there is interaction between students and teachers. So at least I can ask, listen and I can learn!

Overall, analysis of student responses for the semi-structured interviews suggested that students generally felt negative about being provided with masses of written corrections without explanations. They also noted that this feedback tended to focus almost exclusively on grammatical issues, and leave content relatively untouched. In addition to being somewhat daunted by masses of written corrections, they noted that there was little if any praise for good writing. In contrast to these views on written feedback, they seemed to appreciate individual, verbal feedback as more useful for improving their writing ability, especially when it involves explanations about errors and content, not just identification of faults. While expressing some skepticism that teachers would have time for this one-on-one feedback, they noted that it gave them a fuller idea of what needed to be done to improve writing rather than just showing them that the writing had to be improved. Some lower proficiency students seemed to be suggesting that this

one-on-one interaction countered their general perception that teachers gave more classroom attention and time to answering and helping high proficiency students. As well as appreciating the benefits of teacher-student conferencing, the interviews show student support and appreciation for working with peers on corrections.

Student description of their approaches and attitudes to error correction based on written feedback, suggests a limitation of written feedback as the sole means of providing students about their writing. They are uncertain about how to proceed in the making of improvements, not always understanding the nature of their errors, especially in the case of lower proficiency students, and not always perceiving a need to correct anyway if a mark has already been assigned.

The following is a summary of the themes in the semi-structured interviews and the number of times each student touched on any particular theme:

Theme	Experimental group			Control group		
	Harry	Carrie	Sam	Alice	Ricky	Betty
Current focus on form rather than content	1	0	1	4	4	2
Desire for attention to content as well as form	3	2	2	0	4	1
Failure of written comments to provide sufficient feedback for corrections	2	4	6	3	4	2
Finds some written comment helpful	0	0	2	2	3	1
Desire for individual attention, including extended explanations	4	5	3	4	4	3



Impracticality of teachers' giving individual attention	4	1	0	2	2	3
Link between correct grammar and high marks in writing	0	0	0	0	1	0
Discouraged by written feedback	1	1	3	2	2	0
Willingness (+)/unwillingness (-) to approach teacher	0	1 (+) 1 (-)	1 (+)	1 (+) 1 (-)	2 (-) 1 (+)	1 (+)

#### 4.4 Group interviews

The group interviews offered validation of the findings from the semi-structured interviews. They offered data against the research questions for a broader range of students with varying proficiency and conditions. The conferences were conducted by the researcher, but the interviews were done by a colleague in Cantonese. The main themes from the interview transcripts were compared with the researcher diaries of the conferences.

##### 4.4.1 Findings of the first group interview

The three students interviewed in the group interview were Tom (highest scoring student), Flora (mean scoring student) and Candy (lowest scoring student in the group). These students were asked how they felt after receiving their writing from the teacher. The reactions of students in the group were similar to students in the semi-structured interviews as they generally associated teacher feedback with negative feelings. In the semi-structured interviews, one student in the experimental group said he would try to “escape from reality and just ignore the whole thing” if he received negative feedback for his writing from the teacher. This student’s comment coincided with the views of

students in the group interview during which Flora said that it was really frustrating for her to see so many red marks on her paper, which made her lose confidence in learning English. Candy said that she did not want to read back her writing because it was upsetting to realise that there were many mistakes in her work which she feels she should not have made. Like Harry in the semi-structured interview who commented that there was often a lack of any praise, Candy in the group interview also mentioned that: “I have never thought of receiving praise from the teacher. The amount of correction is often more than the work done by me”. She added that she felt scared when she was asked to do writing.

When students were asked about the mode of feedback they often received, Flora said that the teacher usually provided students with written feedback. The teacher would usually underline mistakes on students’ texts. Codes were used to indicate the type of mistakes made. The teacher did not explain problematic areas in student writing on an individual basis, an issue also raised by students in the semi-structured interviews. Tom said that the teacher tended to type out students’ common errors on a sheet of paper and students would then do the corrections together in class. Expanding on how feedback is provided, Candy described how teachers tended to provide students with direct feedback, including any correct versions for faulty sentences rather than spending time explaining to students the reasons for the mistakes made.

In spite of these limitations, the students did indicate that written comments were helpful for them. For example, Tom commented that the written comments provided by the teacher were mostly not bad, although the teacher sometimes only underlined the

mistakes and he did not understand the reasons why he made mistakes. Candy mentioned that she could still benefit if the teacher helped to correct her sentences because copying out corrections would give her a deeper impression – although she contradicted this point later by admitting that she kept making the same mistakes over and over again. However, the point is that students presented a definite view that even with all the limitations that they described, they thought there were benefits in written feedback. In fact, Tom made three references to the positive impact of written feedback, Flora two and Candy, the lowest performing student, one. Except in the case of Candy, who made three negative references to written feedback, the positive and negative comments about balanced each other exactly.

When asked how students handled their corrections, they all expressed a general reliance on the corrections provided by the teacher. Flora said that she was often not required to do them because her teacher usually corrected all her mistakes. Candy simply copied out the corrected sentences provided by the teacher as her correction, as did Tom, who mentioned the likelihood of messing up any corrections which he did not understand.

Turning to the conferencing sessions, all students expressed a positive response to the verbal interaction involved. The desire for individual attention, including extended explanations about individual problems in writing, was strongly expressed. In fact, when students were asked about the mode of feedback they would prefer to receive, they all said that they would prefer to have verbal feedback as they were aware of the failure of written comments to provide sufficient feedback for corrections. Although they had some neutral comments about verbal feedback, in which they simply itemised what they

had learned as a result of the conference, most comments were positive, indicating that conferences were of benefit and more useful than written feedback. Tom and Candy both mentioned verbal conferencing in a positive way eight times, with Flora making five such comments. Notably, there were no negative comments about conferencing by any of the students.

The reasons which students mostly gave for their preference were in fact quite similar. Candy, for example, said that students could have a clearer understanding of the mistakes made and receive immediate responses from the teacher if they had any individual problems:

*It's good because students can have a clearer understanding of the mistakes they made in their writing. Students can ask the teacher questions and the teacher can immediately respond to the questions raised.*

Echoing the views of Candy, Flora said that students tended to remember better after receiving explanations from the teacher. Tom also mentioned the chance to find out the reasons behind mistakes and get a greater understanding of writing problems.

It is significant, though, that at the same time as they express a desire for verbal conferencing, they also express skepticism about the feasibility of teachers giving individual help with corrections. Candy mentioned that she could hardly expect a chance to receive individual attention from the teacher, giving as evidence her teacher's preference to help students correct all their mistakes collectively rather than to give them

individual attention. Flora also mentioned that students were expected to take the initiative in asking teachers if they had any questions about their piece of writing.

#### ***4.4.2 Findings of the second group interview***

The second interview was a chance to determine that students' responses were consistent about their preferences for feedback as described in the findings from the first interview.

In the second interview, students were still positive about conferencing, expressing a preference again for this type of feedback. In fact, this feeling was expressed more strongly than in the first interview, with each student making a greater number of positive references to verbal feedback. Both Tom and Flora commented positively on conferencing seven times, with Candy making ten positive references. They were all able to identify specific writing or language skills they had learned as a result of the conferences. When Tom was asked how he had benefited from the teacher-student conferencing, he said:

*We talked about how to organise my paper better. Now I understand how to organise the ideas and structure the essay. We talked about writing a paragraphing that mentions the connection between the problems followed by the solution. I also have some understanding of the grammatical items wrongly used.*

Similarly, when Flora was asked how she benefited from the teacher-student conferencing, she said it was good to have verbal feedback from the teacher because she could have the chance for better understanding of the problems made in her writing. She said she benefited a lot from the conference because:

*... apart from pointing out the mistakes the teacher can also provide you alternative ways of expressing similar ideas to make them sound better. Just now the teacher has told me that there was a better way to express some ideas or use some words to make the meaning easier to understand.*

When Candy was asked how she benefited from the teacher-student conferencing, she gave an extensive reply:

*... in my essay the third point is irrelevant to the topic just because I had nothing to say. I was unaware of the importance of the relevance of the content of the essay in relation to the topic. Therefore, I did not realise that I should mention the solutions to the problems previously mentioned in the essay and not asking my friend to offer me suggestions to solve the problems which occurred in my lesson.*

Although students generally expressed their desire for individual attention from the teacher including extended explanation, there were some negatives. Tom hinted at his concern in the first interview, without actually expressing it as a negative. In the second interview, he said that: “If I have time, it is good for teachers to provide me with feedback on a one-to-one basis. In reality, teachers may find it difficult to spend time on every student”. This was expressed as an overt concern about conferencing. There are two aspects to this view. The first is recognition of the many demands on teachers’ time. Tom expressed again in this interview the impracticality of teachers giving individual help to students to help them with the corrections because of the number of students that

teachers had to help. This is a view shared by other students in the group, and reinforces the comments made in the first interview.

Regarding the time issue, though, Tom is also aware that students are busy. In his case, the benefits of verbal feedback have to be balanced against the extra time he feels it takes. Of course, his experience was an after-school experience, so his comment relates more to the experimental conditions than any in-class provision of verbal feedback.

The following is a summary table which identifies the common themes in student responses during the group interviews, and the number of times each student touched on any particular theme:

Theme	First interview			Second interview		
	Tom	Flora	Candy	Tom	Flora	Candy
Failure of written comments to provide sufficient feedback for corrections	4	2	2	1	1	3
Students find written feedback helpful to them	2	1	1	3	1	0
Impracticality of teachers' giving individual help with corrections	1	1	1	1	1	1
Students' lack of time for after-school conferences	0	0	0	2	0	0
Blind copying of teachers' corrections	1	2	4	0	0	0
Discouraged by written feedback	0	2	4	0	3	0
Current focus on form rather than content	0	2	1	0	0	0

Resolving individual problems through verbal feedback	5	6	5	5	2	4
Desire for individual attention including extended explanation	4	2	5	4	7	6
Teachers expecting students to take the initiative in asking questions	1	2	0	0	1	1
Willingness (+)/unwillingness (-) to approach teacher	0	0	0	0 (+) 2 (-)	1 (+) 0 (-)	1 (+) 0 (-)
Impact of motivation on learning English	1	2	1	1	1	1
Improvement in writing ability enhances interest in learning English	1	1	1	2	2	1

#### ***4.4.3 Comparisons of the data in group interview 1 and group interview 2***

In the first interview, the set of questions necessarily focused students' responses more on their previous experiences with feedback. This focus led to more negative comments about written feedback than occurred in the later interview. It also led to more neutral comments which simply described feedback procedures. The students described how English language teachers have the tendency to explain the common grammatical problems of students in class rather than allocating time to discuss students' individual problems. They expressed a clear preference for verbal feedback which allowed one-to-one interaction with the teacher, although they still spoke about some positive aspects of written feedback.

This tendency was even stronger in the second interview. The number of positive references to verbal feedback was increased, with less reference to the benefits of written feedback.



The main point to note is that students did not reverse their opinions; only the intensity of positive feeling for conferencing, which can be related to their additional experience with this form of feedback. Therefore, the second group interview validates the data in the first group interview.

#### **4.5 Researcher diary notes for the conferences**

The teacher-researcher diaries corroborate the enthusiasm of students for conferencing. They all, in spite of being shy and slow to initiate topics or questions, demonstrated willingness to participate in conferences, and were actively listening to input about their individual writing pieces. The teacher-researcher diaries also show that all students could identify issues for which they needed extended explanation, and that students were pleased for the chance to get these explanations.

However, in spite of students' expressed desire for individual attention including extended explanations for the mistakes they made in writing during the group interview, the teacher-researcher diaries indicate that students in general were not quite at ease in the conference. All three students scored either one or two for student ease and extended reply in the first conference sessions. This supports student comment that they would need to know and like the teacher to get the most out of conferences. The researcher was unknown to students, and of course this was a new situation. It should be noted that the level of ease improved for both Tom and Flora in the second conference, although this was not true for Candy. Interestingly, Candy is the student who was most vocally negative about written feedback and positive about the potential benefit of conferences.

Candy aside, it appears that continued experience with conference could lead to more active participation.

In addition, students were not yet prepared to take initiative in asking the teacher questions about their writing. They did not initiate talk about their concerns and only raised the questions when invited to do so. There is the very real possibility that this is related to Chinese cultural expectations that students not speak before they are asked to do so as a matter of respect. Teachers are expected to take a dominant role in deciding what students should learn. In any case, there was the impression that the conferences were mostly question and answer sessions rather than students taking any initiative to set the agendas for the sessions.

Overall, the researcher diary notes did not find any contradictions to student interview responses, but these notes did offer data about student behaviour in conferences. While students talk positively about the possibility for one-to-one interaction and the chance to clarify writing-related issues, in fact they tend to be fairly passive in conferences. Positive views, then, were not necessarily linked to active participation. This was especially true for the lower proficiency student, who was very positive about the benefits of conferences, but the least active of the students in the conferences. There is evidence that generally active participation improves over time and with more experience with conferences.

#### **4.6 Comparison of semi-structured interviews and group interviews**

Interview data obtained during the semi-structured interviews and the group interviews revealed that marks are very important to the students, but they do not expect to do well.

The return of writing to students was associated with negative feelings, such as “at a loss” or feeling “nervous” or “vague”. The return of writing with errors identified led to little interest in doing corrections or redrafts.

Another similarity for students in the semi-structured interviews and the group interviews was confusion about the error codes to indicate their mistakes. They wanted more explanation, but both groups were skeptical of their teachers being able to allocate time to students on a one-on-one basis in view of the number of students that the writing teachers had to cater for and the mixed ability of students in the classroom. They did notice that corrections were mainly focused on grammar, with some students commenting that writing teachers should not just focus on form, that is, grammatical structure and accuracy, but also to teach students how to generate ideas for their writing.

Students with higher English scores in both groups seemed to be more able to cope with the correction of their writing on their own, for example, surfing the internet or visiting libraries. On the other hand, the average and lower scoring students tended to rely more heavily on the teacher to give them help with the corrections. The students in the semi-structured interview also referred to a reliance on peers, a reliance not mentioned in the group interview. Linked to the greater independence cited by the more proficient students is the reality across the student groups for higher proficiency students to appreciate verbal feedback a little less than students with lower English proficiency. All students, but especially the lower performing students express their need for more individual attention to address their problems. Students in both groups also reported the inadequacies of written feedback, consistently referring to the benefits of interaction with

the teacher, interaction which allowed for fuller explanations and attention to specific writing problems.

Regardless of proficiency, students in both kinds of interviews reported positively on the use of teacher-student conferencing as the mode of feedback. Furthermore, all students in both types of interviews claimed that their interest in learning would be enhanced if they could make improvement in their writing ability and make use of the knowledge they had acquired for communication purposes.

Overall, there was a high degree of similarity in student opinions in the two sets of interview data. A difference, however, in the two sets of interview data relates to doing corrections. Students in the semi-structured interviews felt that they had the responsibility to hand in their corrections despite the problems they might encounter when trying to do the corrections, whereas students in the group interviews tended not to do corrections if they found it was beyond their ability to do so. It should be noted, however, that students in the semi-structured interviews were speaking to their teacher, and so would have a vested interest in speaking enthusiastically about their own diligence in making corrections.

Therefore, the two group interviews can be regarded as validating the main finding in the semi-structured interviews that students prefer verbal feedback, although they still value and want some written feedback.

#### **4.7 Summary of findings**

The findings of the main study revealed a statistically significant difference in students' performance in both content and grammar scores between the experimental and control

groups ( $p < 0.05$ ). The effect size was very large ( $\eta^2 > 0.14$ ) in both the paired-samples t-test and the mixed between-within ANOVA. The scores of both experimental and control groups were similar in the pre-test, writing 1, 2, 3, and 4. After receiving the treatment, scores in the experimental group became higher than those in the control group in the post-test, writing 1 redraft and correction, writing 2 redraft and correction, writing 3 redraft and correction, and writing 4 redraft and correction. This suggests that the use of teacher-student conferencing to provide feedback on students' writing has a positive impact on the overall improvement of students' texts in the experimental group.

Therefore, the first research question about whether conferencing can lead to improvement in the content of writing and the second research question about whether conferencing can lead to improvement in the grammatical accuracy of writing were both answered positively by this study. The third research question: "What is the affective response of students to teacher-student conferencing?" was addressed using the semi-structured interviews followed by two group interviews for further corroboration of the data obtained. That interview data obtained indicated that students responded positively to conferences, and also expressed the inadequacies of using written feedback as the only mode of feedback. They also made a positive link between improved English writing results and overall motivation. Some problems identified in the interviews include receiving written comments that are too general and not being able to understand the correction codes in order to identify the types of mistake they have made. The lack of a face-to-face encounter between teacher and student has deprived students of

the opportunity to negotiate meaning and ask for clarifications. They also find the negative comments so discouraging that they lose interest in doing more writing practice. This effect may deny the student the opportunity to develop his/her writing in the future. In contrast, the benefits of using teacher-student conferencing as the mode of feedback were repeatedly discussed and illustrated in the interview data, although despite such enthusiasm students tended to take a fairly passive role in the conferences. The implications of these findings for the second language teaching of writing will be addressed in the next chapter.

# Chapter 5

## 5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study into the use of conferencing in the Hong Kong secondary context suggests that the teaching of English writing would be enhanced by the inclusion of face-to-face conferencing as part of the teaching and feedback strategy. Findings of the main study indicate that students in the experimental group who experienced teacher-student conferencing, were able to make a statistically significant improvement in their writing results in comparison with students in the control group, who experienced only written feedback ( $p < 0.05$ ). Not only do students' writing results improve as a result of conferencing, but students themselves are able to articulate the benefits for them, and to talk about the limitations of existing practices for their learning. This was true of the students in the semi-structured interviews. By itself this may not be compelling evidence as the researcher/interviewer was also the person who conducted the conferences, and an element of teacher-pleasing could account for their comments. However, the results were reproduced and hence validated in the follow-up interviews with students who were interviewed by someone other than the researcher who had conducted the conferences. So there is an overall endorsement by students in this study for the use of conferencing as part of the writing programme. Of course, the inclusion of conferencing as part of the teaching of writing has significant implications for teachers and students in Hong Kong. This chapter will focus on the significance and the implications of the findings.

## **5.1 Student perspectives on feedback**

Findings of the semi-structured interviews and the group interviews revealed that students had very definite views about the feedback that they received on their writing. They indicated a preference for teacher-student conferences as the mode for the delivery of teacher feedback, as they were aware of the inadequacies of the written feedback they usually received. They were able to articulate in what ways they had difficulty with existing patterns of written feedback, and in what ways they thought verbal feedback would be helpful for their development of writing skills.

To start with, students commented that the feedback they usually got was very focused on grammar or spelling mistakes, not to do with the actual content. This means that feedback for them has been more an indication of errors than a guide to actually improving the text in terms of meeting a communicative purpose or of preparing a text for a genuine audience. Not only is the feedback generally confined to form, but even this feedback is not found usable by the students for making corrections.

### ***5.1.1 Difficulty comprehending written feedback***

While students in the semi-structured interviews and the group interviews generally found that written feedback with a focus on grammar useful, it is also true that they felt that this kind of feedback was not adequate to help them do their corrections and avoid making similar mistakes in the future. Students in the semi-structured interviews commented that they often felt very frustrated after receiving their marked writing pieces, because they failed to understand the reasons for mistakes and the teacher's use of error codes further made it more confusing for them.



Similar findings emerged from the group interviews. One of the students in the group interviews said that although he found the written feedback provided for him was useful in the location and identification of error, nevertheless, he found that the feedback was not enough to help him rework his papers and that he did not know the reasons for making mistakes despite the fact that the mistakes were underlined for him. Another student in the group interviews also commented that he found the use of error codes so confusing to him that he had given up doing corrections and would not hand in his corrections to his teacher.

The inadequacy of providing students with just written feedback is an issue raised by many researchers, as indicated in the *Literature Review*. The effectiveness of written commentary was queried by Sommers (1982) who commented that although written commentary was the most common form of feedback provided for students and had taken up most of the teachers' time, the efficacy of these comments in helping students revise their texts was doubted as students might have difficulties in comprehending teachers' written comments (1982, p.148). Knoblauch & Brannon (1981) also outlined the problems of relying on written feedback to student writing, noting that students often failed to comprehend the teacher's responses to their writing; and that even if they recognised the nature of the error, they were not necessarily able to translate that into any action to improve the writing (1981, p.1).

Findings of the semi-structured interviews and the two group interviews coincided with the findings in Lee's Hong Kong based study (2004), especially regarding the difficulties in interpreting error codes. Although the teachers interviewed in Lee's study admitted

that they used error codes in marking student writing, the majority of them were aware that students had difficulties in correcting their errors based on the correction codes due to their limited understanding of grammatical terms related to the correction codes (2004, p.296). Students had insufficient knowledge of the grammatical system to recognize the nature of the error or to repair it.

In common with the findings of the above researchers, this study demonstrates that for students, just knowing that they have made a grammatical mistake, which an error code indicates, is a long way from knowing how to actually repair that mistake and how to avoid making that mistake in future writing. Students in this study had to rely on their own devices to effect change in their writing and so had to devise their own strategies to overcome the problem of not knowing how to do their corrections. Harry, the student with the highest proficiency in the experimental group, said he would rather look up dictionaries, visit libraries or surf the internet to help him with his corrections in writing than to seek help from the teacher or classmates. However, most students in the semi-structured interviews expressed their desire for more individual attention from their teachers to solve writing problems. One student even observed that students who were given individual attention from the teacher were able to make greater progress in writing than students who were not provided with this kind of attention. In the absence of teacher input, some students rely on the help of peers. However, a number of students commented that if they failed to get help from the teacher to help them understand how to correct their work, they would either give up doing their writing corrections or refuse to hand in rewritten drafts to the teacher.

There is a clear pedagogical implication in these findings. In the first place, there is a strong indication of the need for a more interactive form of feedback. As Knoblauch & Brannon (1981, p.1) recommend, ongoing dialogue between teachers and students is necessary in helping students with the revision of their texts. Furthermore, students' problems in understanding the use of error codes and the associated grammatical terms is a case for explicit attention and direct teaching of the error codes themselves, and the grammatical terms which underpin the codes. This will help students understand their errors more precisely. However, the findings also suggest that teachers should be aware that error identification in student writing is not the same as students' being able to repair mistakes in their writing. Class time, therefore, should be allocated to the training of students to correct errors based on these correction codes, through teacher 'think-aloud', modeled rewrites and through shared rewriting, for example. The nature of feedback needs to evolve from mere written identification of errors to extended explanation of shortfalls, and to include interactive feedback which helps students with those explanations, and with the processes of repair and correction.

### ***5.1.2 Emphasis on form over meaning***

In the semi-structured interviews, students indicated that the feedback which they received was focused on grammatical accuracy rather than on meaning in their writing. Some students indicated that this was a problem for them and that the relevance and development of students' ideas for their writing had not been given the attention it deserved. One student said that the teacher tended to focus more on surface errors than the content of her writing. Another student commented that teachers should place equal

emphasis on both form and content when providing feedback to students. He explained that if the content of his writing was irrelevant to the topic he was asked to write on, it would be pointless for the teacher to provide feedback on the grammatical mistakes he made in his writing. He said it would be more meaningful if the teacher could explain to him the reasons why the content of his writing was irrelevant to the topic.

A more general trend that emerged from the analysis of interview data is that students tend to associate error-free writing with good writing, and to take on board a rather limited view of writing as a showcase of grammar and vocabulary expertise rather than a means of effectively communicating ideas to a real audience for a real purpose. In this way, this study would tend to suggest that there has been little forward momentum from the situation described by Sengupta & Falvey's study (1998) which revealed that the teaching of L2 writing by English language teachers in Hong Kong is mainly dominated by language-related concerns at the sentence level with minimal focus on either the discourse-related or cognitive aspects of writing (1998, p.78-79). The predictable outcome of such a focus on surface level, error-free composition was described by Pennington & Cheung (1995) as the conceptualisation of writing as a piece of work to be produced by an individual for a teacher-audience, a view which contradicts a more meaning-focused orientation (1995, p.20). This works well for students who are motivated to succeed in examinations, but this implies a strong instrumental motivation, which is not based on the work being personally meaningful for students.

Teachers should consider the kinds of messages their feedback is giving students in terms of the nature of writing, what writing actually is, and what is important about

writing. If students are to take on board a more meaning-based view of writing and embrace it as one more way of sharing new and interesting ideas with others, then the teaching of writing and the giving of feedback need to focus as much on the ideas which are communicated as the ways in which they are communicated. It is not unreasonable to suppose that before students can care too deeply about how they write something, it might be a good idea for them to actually care about what they are writing.

Of course some students are able to care about the ‘what’ as well as the ‘how’ already, as evidenced by their request in this study for attention to more than just form in the feedback process. This is an encouraging indication that some students in this strongly examination-orientated context are able to recognise the importance of the message in their writing. However, if there is to be a more widespread challenge to the instrumental focus on correctness for the sake of examinations, with students taking on board a wider and more meaning-oriented view of their English writing tasks, then the teaching and giving of feedback for writing need to address content as well as form. It is therefore necessary for teachers to broaden not only their modes of giving feedback, but also the nature of the feedback itself.

### ***5.1.3 Demotivation of evaluative feedback***

Most students at the semi-structured interview reported that they did not expect to gain high marks for their writing regardless of their language proficiency. Students in general did not have much confidence in their writing especially as they were seldom given praise for the work they had done. The tendency of teachers not to give positive encouragement to students is an area worth investigating as teachers’ attitudes can have

a direct impact on the motivation of students in learning a language. This is in line with the argument put forward by Belcher & Liu (2004, p.5). They suggested that students who have low motivation would be unlikely to take the initiative in learning, and would not take the feedback of teachers seriously. Students in the semi-structured and group interviews generally agreed that they could better be motivated to learn English if they were able to receive more individual attention from the teacher. Their need for more extended and individualised explanations has already been noted. However, they also suggested that individual attention from the teacher would include encouragement, which they think would help them perform better in the next piece of writing and motivate them to work harder for further improvement. Daiker (1999, p.156) recommends praise “as a remedy for apprehension and as a motivator of student writing” (1999, p.156). He described a cycle in which students who suffered from writing apprehension tended to avoid writing situations. The lack of writing practice would mean further deterioration of the students’ ability to write well, further unfavorable comments, and greater reluctance to write, and so on. He would certainly agree with the students in this study that writing teachers should try to reduce students’ apprehension of writing and increase their motivation to write through positive reinforcement and praise rather than to adopt a product-oriented approach in the evaluation of student writing.

Students commented specifically on how discouraging it is to receive a piece of writing that is covered in red marks, error codes or corrections. Given the advice of writers such as Marzano & Arthur that this kind of written feedback may well be an exercise in

futility, with little discernable impact on students' writing ability anyway, this is a very questionable practice (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981, p.1). Not only is it not specifically helping students to improve, but it is actively discouraging them, which perpetuates a cycle of demotivation. So teachers should absolutely avoid premature and excessive focus on errors at the preliminary drafts in view of the fact that it would be extremely frustrating and demoralising for student writers to see red marks all over their papers.

Aside from the motivating, or 'feel good' factor associated with encouragement and praise from the teacher, it is good practice to let students know what they are accomplishing successfully. In order to move forward, students need to know what they already know and can do as well as what they need to know and need to be able to do. Therefore, when providing feedback to students, teachers should bear in mind that the strengths and weaknesses of students should be identified and that students be informed of the aspects of writing which they have done well as well as areas which need further improvement.

Overall, then, as Silva (1990) pointed out, "a positive, encouraging, and collaborative workshop environment within which students ... can work through their composing processes" is essential (1990, p.15). Therefore, teachers should no longer just be engaged in assessing the written works of their students but should also adopt a supportive, encouraging, and collaborative role in helping learners develop strategies for generating ideas, revising, editing, and overall, making writing an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

#### ***5.1.4 Negotiation of meaning in interactive conferences***

Students in this study were positive about the interactive nature of the conference, noting the possibility for clarification on their part, and extended explanations on the teacher's part. This kind of clarification and negotiation of meaning in interactive conferences is actually in line with the views of the social constructivists who hold the view that language and learning occur through interaction with society. Vygotsky (1978) explained that teacher-student conferencing could help students go beyond what they can currently do, to achieve their potential. In this process, the teacher plays the role of an experienced writer who can support students through their zone of "proximal development" (1978, p.85). From a Vygotskian point of view, it is the collaboration between teacher and student that helps foster the language development of student writers.

Other writers highlight the interactive element of conferencing as central to the success of this form of feedback (e.g., Carnicelli, 1980, and Rose, 1982). Teacher-student conferencing can be regarded as a type of collaborative learning in which the student writer is afforded the experience of having a real reader giving responses to his or her own writing, while the teacher helps develop a draft through probing and supporting the writer in revising the draft and evaluating decisions. Students are able to recognise that they can achieve more with individual teacher input than they can alone. Instinctively, they are asking for exactly the kind of input that interactionist philosophies of learning and language say they need. Student feedback in this study reinforces the need for teachers to include more interactive strategies as part of their feedback repertoire.



Conferencing, which is all about two-way communication between teacher and student, with opportunities for clarification and negotiation, and at least the potential for learners to take a more active role in the communication process, is a strategy which meets students' stated needs for individual feedback in a way which allows for explanations and clarifications. Of course the degree to which students take on the two-way aspect of the communication is a culturally shaped phenomenon, the implications of which will be addressed more fully below.

## **5.2 Cultural implications**

One of the major contributions of this paper to the field of second language writing is that it tested a feedback approach, which originated and has mostly been applied in western cultural contexts, in the local Hong Kong context, which of course is culturally very different from English as L1 settings. Conferencing is a kind of interaction, and any interaction implies particular roles and relationships between the interlocutors, and the kinds of roles that teachers and students are willing to take in conferences are manifestations of culture. There has been some suggestions that an interactive model of writing feedback does not take into account the traditional focus on examination results that occurs in some cultures. Horowitz (1986), for example, thought it unreasonable to use methods of writing teaching and feedback that attended to audience rather than academic results for students who had been conditioned to see examinations "the be-all and end-all of the educational process" (1986, p.143). Silva (1988) also suggested that it was disrespectful to L2 learners to place them in educational contexts that did not match their cultural experiences, and so cautioned against wholesale

adoption of methods from English as L1 cultural settings into English as L2 cultural settings, including feedback strategies (1988, p.517).

Although the cultural context and socialisation practices are very different from western settings, this study demonstrated that conferencing is successful in Hong Kong, an Asian culture, and that teachers can use conferencing as a feedback strategy in the confidence that there is no cultural impediment in doing so. However, while conferencing can be adopted with confidence as a culturally appropriate feedback strategy, it is certainly true that there are differences in how the conferences look, at least to date, in this setting.

### ***5.2.1 Teacher dominance and student passivity in conferences***

Sperling (1991) writes about how students in conferences displayed very different levels of ease in communicating with the teacher, especially if the teacher is seen as an authority figure (1991, p.155). It was noted in the research design chapter of this paper that the communication “demands” of a typical conference as used in an L1 context would be unlikely to promote any ease in communication for the students. The literature about conferencing describes a successful conference as one in which the focus of attention is on the students and their work and not the tutor and his or her agenda, with students critically reflecting on their work (Walker & Elias, 1987, p.282). Newkirk (1995) reaffirms that it is the students’ responsibility to initiate conference topics and take up conversational and evaluative responsibility during the conference (p.196). However, it seemed an unreasonable and unrealistic demand on Hong Kong students who are used to taking a very different role in teacher-student conversations. For this reason, the teacher/researcher took on a more controlling role than is recommended for conferencing,

initiating the topics, and generally determining the flow of conversation. There was a schedule of questions and prompts which guided the conference, and while students could initiate topics if they wanted to, it was generally assumed that students would rely on the teacher setting the agenda.

The behaviour of the students in the conferences of this study suggests that this was a reasonable decision, certainly for an initial experience with conferencing. As a rule, students were fairly passive in the conferences, and allowed the teacher to direct proceedings. Observations recorded after the teacher-student conferencing reveal that students did not take an active role during the conference sessions despite the fact that most students found the teacher-student conferencing useful. In fact, these conferences were not at the 'high' end of the collaborative continuum described by Sperling (1990, p.318). The diary notes record that even when students are provided with the opportunity to have teacher-student conferencing, it is very unlikely that they will take an active, initiating role during the conference. There appeared to be some difference according to the proficiency of students, although given the small sample size in the researcher diary notes, it is difficult to make any assumptions that behaviour is linked to proficiency rather than personal style. Tom, the most proficient student in the follow-up group interview, did not take an active role in the conference. Initially he seemed to lack confidence during his interaction with the teacher. Although he appeared to be quite confident when he was asked if he understood the topic of the writing and was able to provide suggestions to make improvement to his writing, the teacher had to take the initiative to ask him questions before he responded. After the warming up at the

conference, Tom was able to take a more active role at the conference, for example, he took the initiative to ask for clarifications about the use of tenses when he was asked if he would like to ask any questions in relation to his writing. The lowest proficiency student in the follow-up interviews, Candy, was also passive, with little change in the second conference.

The tendency of most students to gradually warm up within each conference, even though they were still not exactly verbose, points to the possibility that students would learn to take on more active roles as they become more familiar with the purposes and processes of conferencing. It is also true that although the difference was not a marked one, most students were more at ease in the second conference, and this too supports a cautious optimism that students could come to be more active participants in teacher-student conferences.

### ***5.2.2 Evolving teacher-student roles***

Although the conference sessions provided for the students seemed to be teacher-dominated, students interviewed appreciated the opportunity to have teacher conferencing with the students on a one-on-one basis, especially with the weaker students who needed the additional support provided by conferences. So their relatively passive behavior is not an indication that they do not find value in the process. A more likely explanation is that students' performances in the conference sessions could have been due to the fact that they had not been socialised into such an interactive process of learning, and their perceptions about and earlier experiences with learning in Hong Kong education make it difficult for them to take on an active role in relation to

the teacher. They could well be feeling that they might appear disrespectful to be questioning a teacher, and exerting any kind of dominance in an exchange with a teacher as in Chinese culture students are not expected to speak before they are asked to do so as a matter of respect.

As well as being a matter of respect, there is the traditional expectation in Chinese culture that it is a teacher's responsibility to locate and correct errors for them. Students have been reinforced in this belief by teachers who according to Lee (2004) also possess the view that it is better to help students correct their mistakes rather than to explain students' mistakes on an individual basis.

So while conferencing is successful within the paradigm of existing teacher-student roles and relationships, it is worth considering whether an evolution of teacher and student roles could improve the efficacy of conferences. This evolved teacher-student relationship would look more like a partnership in which students are encouraged and enabled to take more responsibility for their own English learning and writing.

This should not be a heavy handed affair in which students are pushed to participate in procedures which feel uncomfortable for them. Certainly it is also important for writing teachers to have an understanding of students' response toward teacher feedback, an understanding which can lead to a more harmonious classroom environment, improved student motivation to write, and increased student confidence in their writing teachers, which will in turn help them develop their writing competence. Leki (1991) argued that teachers should find out their students' views on teacher response and feedback because,

for example, “Ignoring their request for error correction works against their motivation ... [and] seems at best counter-productive, at worst, high-handed and disrespectful of our students, to simply insist that they trust our preferences” (1991, p.210). So without pushing the issue – and it should be remembered that students are actually positive about conferencing – students can be gradually socialised to take a more active and reflective role in their own learning. Of course the actual participation in conferences will contribute to this gradual cultural shift, but even so, it is always likely that conferences in Hong Kong schools will have a different look and feel from those in the West as the participants work together to evolve a format which reflects and shapes their cultural expectations.

### **5.2.3 *Student training***

As well as being gradually socialised into more interactive feedback processes such as conferencing, students need explicit training in how to participate effectively. A simple starting place is to inform them about the purpose and format of conferencing. The observations in the researcher’s diary of conferences record that students did not seem sure about what a conference was and there was the impression that the conference was a question and answer session rather than a conversation about the writing.

Training in how to behave in conferences can happen within the conferences, with the teacher modeling the types of questions and interactive leads that students can deploy. Newkirk (1995) describes a process of “role-shifting” in which the teacher may shift to asking questions to direct the conference, and let the student learn the language and expectations of a conference performance (1995, p.212).

As well as developing the skills to participate more effectively and proactively in conferences, students need to develop the attitudes which encourage this participation. When they recognise their partnership role, they will participate more actively. As with learning any new set of skills and attitudes, progress will be gradual, but at any skill level, there is evidence in this study that it is a positive experience for students.

### **5.3 Benefit for low-proficiency students**

The value of verbal feedback through teacher-student conferencing was affirmed by students of all proficiency levels in this study. For example, one high proficiency student commented that “I think more improvement will be shown if the teachers could remind me what problems I have to solve”. This view was shared by other students with lower English proficiency, who acknowledged that teacher-student conferencing could help individuals of varying learning abilities to perform better, and added that the conferencing could also motivate students to learn English.

An interesting finding from this study, though, is that contrary to expectations based on the *Literature Review*, the lower proficiency students seemed to benefit more than the high proficiency students. Low proficiency students, according to the interviews in this study, would be less likely to get the help they need from teachers outside of a conference than high proficiency students who have greater confidence in approaching a teacher within class time to request assistance. Students with lower English proficiency were more likely to seek help from their teachers to help them with their writing corrections in a teacher-conference setting than in front of a class full of peers. One student with the lowest English proficiency in the experimental group said that if

she were given the opportunity to have teacher-conferencing with her teacher, she would ask many questions about “the use of tenses, because I always make mistakes about using the wrong tenses”. She further commented that it would be very difficult for her to do corrections without the teacher first explaining her mistakes. Another commented that she would never ask a question in class as she would be afraid of looking stupid. Yet another comment refers to the extra help which the good students get in class. It is clear that the protected and private quality of a conference setting is much more conducive to students’ receiving the explanations and coaching they need than traditional classroom settings.

So while some writers (Freedman & Sperling, 1985, and Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997) express findings showing that low proficiency students are less able to make use of the feedback given in conferences, the fact is that low proficiency students in this context gained more help through this mode of feedback than in written feedback. Of course it may still be the case that high proficiency students can do more with teacher feedback from conferences than low proficiency students, and they certainly responded more confidently in the conferences. However, in the setting for this study, it certainly appears that students of low proficiency were able to get individual help through the teacher-student conference. This individual attention and instruction are things that they would not normally access.

For these students, the qualities of a conference described by Carnicelli (1980) are particularly helpful for their learning: the individual nature of teacher-student conference which can offer student writers a deep sense of security; the amount of feedback provided



in a teacher-student conference, which is often greater than an equal amount of time spent on written commentary; and the two-way communication between teacher and student which allows opportunities for clarification and negotiation (1980, p.105-111).

It is worth noting that that kinds of difference in participation in and use of conference feedback reported by the above authors is perhaps more a feature of the cultural contexts within which they observed the conferences, that is, in more western cultures, where students take on more active roles in discourse with teachers. In such a cultural context, a highly proficient student could be expected to be more vocal and more genuinely interactive than in Hong Kong, where, as discussed above, even highly successful students tend to assume more traditional teacher-student roles.

As students develop experience and confidence in interacting in conferences, it may emerge in the Hong Kong context that highly proficient students are able to take more information out of a verbal conference than less proficient students. However, currently, the highly proficient students are both more able to comprehend teachers' written comments and more able to deploy strategies to effect rewriting of their papers than their less proficient peers. Low proficiency students are more disadvantaged by the current exclusive use of written feedback. Therefore, less proficient students are able to report a more immediate gain from conferencing relative to their gain from written comments alone.

#### **5.4 Written and verbal feedback: integrated approach**

A strong case has been made throughout this paper about the inadequacy of written feedback as the sole form of feedback on students' writing. However, while this

inadequacy has been emphasized, it is still true that students in the semi-structured interviews and group interviews consistently reflected that the written feedback provided for them was useful, even if inadequate as a sole source of feedback. When teachers, then, are planning how they will offer feedback on their students' writing, this piece of research suggests not that language teachers should abandon written feedback. There is no suggestion that it is a case of either one or the other, absolutely not, especially given Hyland's observation that all methods of feedback "have their advantages and drawbacks, and teachers might use them in tandem to offer students the best of all worlds" (2003, p.207). Therefore, the recommendation is for an integrated approach; one which uses both written and verbal modes.

Such an integrated approach is consistent with the recommendations of Knoblauch & Brannon (1981). They had a negative view of teacher-written commentary in response to student writing, but still held the view that the continued practice of teachers providing written commentary was indeed "central to enlightened instruction, despite the apparent weight of evidence to the contrary" (1981, p.1). Sommers (1982) was similarly pessimistic about written feedback as a sole source of feedback on students' writing, but still acknowledged a role for written feedback as part of an overall approach (1982, p.148-149). Although findings of this study, and other studies cited in the *Literature Review* support the continued practice of teachers providing written feedback to their students, the comments of students give a clear message that the quality of written feedback needs attention if such feedback is to be as constructive as it possibly can be. It is incumbent on teachers to reflect critically on their current practice of

providing written feedback to students in light of student perspectives on the difficulties of comprehending and applying the feedback, and on the limitations of comments on form alone.

The inadequacy of written feedback as a sole mode of feedback may not be entirely surprising to teachers. According to earlier research conducted by Lee (2004) and described in the *Literature Review*, over half of the L2 teachers in Hong Kong (61%) thought their error correction practices brought about some student progress in accuracy (2004, p.297). However, in the same questionnaire survey, only 9% of teachers reported that they thought their students were making good progress. Obviously, then, additional instructional and feedback options need to be explored if students are to make good progress. If teachers are to use an integrated approach, there is the question of how to use the relative modes. Arndt (1993, p.100) suggests that written feedback be used to clear up minor points of language or style whereas teacher-student conferencing is used for matters relating to meaning and organisation in writing. Conrad & Goldstein (1999, p.173) similarly recommend the use of teacher-student conferencing to deal with revision problems which were of a more global, abstract nature. This breakdown of form and meaning, accommodated by written and verbal feedback respectively, certainly addresses students' need for feedback on meaning, and in fact was suggested by one of the students as a formula for feedback. It also makes provision for the kind of feedback which will ensure long-term learning about writing processes that students can apply on new and future writing assignments. However, it does not accommodate the difficulties highlighted by students in this study of actually interpreting and responding to written

feedback. If teachers do adopt this “attention to form through written feedback” and “to meaning through verbal approach to feedback” (Arndt, 1993, p.100), the implication of improving the quality of written feedback remains. Students’ expressed need for explanations means either that the written feedback needs to be more detailed or that some explanatory component on form should also be included in verbal conferences. In any event, there is a role for both written and verbal feedback which addresses both form and meaning.

## **5.5 School policy-level implications**

It is no small matter for teachers to take on board the suggestion to incorporate conferencing as part of their repertoire of feedback strategies. Any change in practice demands a thoughtful consideration of the potential impact on school practices. The *Introduction* outlined some of the contextual factors which help shape school practices in Hong Kong. The heavy emphasis on examination results was described, an emphasis which impacts on time allocation for learning tasks, beliefs about the nature of learning and teaching and general priorities in the curriculum. The use of conferencing will have implications for all these broader school contextual factors.

### ***5.5.1 Rethinking the nature of writing at school policy level***

The historical focus on examination preparation in Hong Kong has shaped views and school practices relating to writing. Morris went so far as to suggest that the public examination was the guiding force in the Hong Kong school curriculum (1990, p.56), and certainly in teacher interviews conducted by Sengupta & Falvey (1998), every teacher referred to the importance of the examination. This examination culture has affected

both how much students have to write and the kind of attention which teachers pay to students' writing. Students are required, for example, to produce single drafts on a large number of papers rather than multiple drafts of a small number of papers as they need time to write a great variety of text types for public examinations. The impact of examination preparation spills over into marking too. Teachers focus on accuracy because they think this is one of the major criteria in assessing student writing in the public examination, and certainly more important than the content.

By contrast, the English syllabus document, *Syllabuses for Secondary Schools: English Language (Secondary 1-5, 1999)*, clearly describes writing as a meaning-making activity, and clearly suggests that feedback should not be confined to surface level errors, should not include correction of all mistakes, which it describes as demotivating, and should focus on both meaning and form. Unfortunately, as described earlier, many teachers in Hong Kong are still unprepared to allow the language official documents to guide their classroom practices (Richards, Tung & Ng, 1991, p.89).

So writers such as Lee (2008) point out that examinations, not curriculum documents, tend to determine the view of writing and the nature of feedback. The responses from students in this study would certainly bear this out. They report a strong focus on form, with little or no attention to meaning in their writing over the years. However, it is one thing for a teacher to embrace the views upheld in curriculum documents and research, and quite another for school decision makers to embrace them. Of course teachers should review their practices, but at the same time, school policy and decision makers need to make it possible for teachers to implement the kind of curriculum that is

recommended in official documents, and supported by research. Lee (2008) also pointed out that teachers in Hong Kong, regardless of personal beliefs about writing and feedback, were required to emphasise error-free versions, and to identify all errors, correcting those that students cannot correct themselves. Such a policy in a school would certainly impinge on the practices of a teacher committed to a focus on meaning in writing, with selective attention to error identification and correction.

So apart from changing the attitude of teachers, there is also the need to change the attitude of principals in relation to teaching writing if the quality of writing instruction is to be changed. The attitude changes must be informed more by the curriculum documents, and less by traditional values about writing and examinations. School principals can be invited to attend talks organised by the Hong Kong Education Bureau to explain to them the process-writing theories and inform them that comprehensive checking of student errors may do students more harm than good in the long run. Instead of counting the number of essays to be completed within a term, and the performance of teachers assessed on students' performance in public examinations, the focus of attention should be shifted to the quality of writing instruction in the classroom. This can be achieved through providing effective feedback to student writers and providing more attention to cater for the needs of individual writers.

Moreover, schools should invite parents to attend talks in school on Teachers-Parents Day and explain to them recent developments in language theories. There is perhaps a fear in school personnel that many parents still hold the belief that the effort and diligence of English language teachers are reflected through the number of red marks on student texts

and the number of essays English language teachers marked. As with any adjustment in practice, it is necessary to inform parents and offer research-based arguments to support the changes in practice. As the broader school community addresses the nature of writing, and re-thinks what is considered effective writing instruction and feedback, teachers will be facilitated to implement new approaches to writing and writing feedback.

### ***5.5.2 Identifying curriculum priorities based on learner needs***

Also associated with an examination culture are rigid schedules where learning is predetermined and timetabled so that specific content must be covered by particular times. When completing a body of work in a given time is the curriculum priority, and focusing solely on examination requirements shapes the teaching and learning experiences in a classroom, it is very easy to lose sight of individual learners.

In contrast, the use of conferencing is a very learner-centred approach to teaching and learning. The whole point of conferencing is to give input and support to students at their point of need, rather than according to an externally determined schedule. The very nature of the process forces teachers to shape instruction that responds to the exact difficulties that students are experiencing in their writing at a given time. This is a clear step away from rigid programming and scheduling which is done in isolation from the students and their needs, and a clear step towards student-responsive programming and scheduling, as outlined in the curriculum documents which should be guiding school and teacher behaviours.

### **5.5.3 *Timetabling implications***

Rigid scheduling of school content counteracts teachers' efforts to respond to individual needs in their writing. So some leeway in timetabling is important. A further timetabling implication is for extra lessons to be timetabled for conferencing. In this study, the conferencing was held after school. Clearly this is not a feasible long-term option. For a start, teachers have heavy workloads and should not be expected to carry out core teaching duties after school hours. The other point is that students can hardly be expected to get excited about out-of-school-hours instruction. In fact in the interviews, the time issue was raised by students. They were skeptical of teachers' having time for conferencing, and there was a certain concern about their own time. One student in the group interview said that although he found conferencing useful, he might not be able to attend teacher-student conferencing after school as he also had a busy schedule. This is not surprising given that they were participating in the afternoon when others had gone home. They may have been willing to give this time for a one-off involvement in a research project, but it would be highly unlikely that most students would sign up for this kind of activity on a regular basis. Quite apart from the inconvenience and work overload implicit in out-of-school-hours scheduling, the allocation of time to certain pursuits is how schools acknowledge the relative importance of those pursuits. If something is important, it will be timetabled in lesson time. If it is less important, it may be squeezed in after school, or in recess. If schools allow teachers to schedule conferences in their own time as an extra to the core curriculum, there are definite messages to students that this is an optional, less important part of their education, rather than a vital component of a well-balanced and student-centred approach to the teaching of



writing. Therefore, it is necessary to schedule class time for both conferencing and training in the skills of conferencing, as part of the regular writing programme.

In this way, rather than adding to teacher workloads, teacher-student conferencing would actually alleviate the need for all marking to be done out of school time, and contribute to a more balanced work load for teachers.

#### ***5.5.4 School support for teacher professional development***

No innovation in teaching practice will occur if teachers are not made aware of new practices and the reasons for them. Professional development and critical reflection that focus on the particular innovations are necessary. To improve the quality of writing instruction, English language teachers should be required to attend seminars and workshops organised by the Hong Kong Education Bureau to keep themselves updated about the latest development in language theories. Professional networking is also useful, both within and across school professional communities. In sharing sessions, more experienced English language teachers can share with less experienced teachers some of their insights gained through their experience. Similarly, fresh teachers can share new theoretical perspectives they may have gained through their more recent teacher preparation courses.

Apart from keeping themselves abreast of the latest language theories, teachers should also critically reflect on their own teaching practice on a regular basis, particularly in terms of any new theoretical frameworks to which they have been exposed through professional development activities. Such critical reflection can trigger a deeper

understanding of their teaching. Critical reflection involves examining teaching experiences as a basis for evaluation and decision making and as a source for change (Bartlett 1990, and Wallace 1991). Teachers who are better informed as to the nature of their teaching are able to evaluate their stage of professional growth and the aspects of their teaching they need to change. In addition, when critical reflection is seen as an ongoing process and a routine part of teaching, it enables teachers to feel more confident about trying different options and assessing the effects on their teaching and students' learning. If teachers are actively involved in reflecting on what is happening in their own classrooms, they are in a position to discover whether or not a gap exists between what they teach and what their students learn. This process of reflection is a particular kind of research that Cross (1988) describes as:

... the study by classroom teachers of the impact of their teaching on the students in their classrooms. The basic premise of classroom research is that teachers should use their classrooms as laboratories to study the learning process as it applies to their particular disciplines; teachers should become skilful, systematic observers of how the students in their classrooms learn.

(Cross, 1988, p.3)

Overall, then, if teachers are to adjust their writing practices for the teaching and responding to writing, it is incumbent on school administrations to offer time and space, and even financial assistance if necessary, for teacher professional development activities

which address the attitudes and skills needed by teachers to implement teacher-student conferences in their English classes.

## **5.6 Writing as a tool to improve motivation for learning English**

The input given by students in the semi-structured and group interviews affirms that improved results in writing will improve overall motivation to learn English. Therefore any time and effort which teachers devote to improving the relevance and efficacy of the writing programme, including a focus on more interactive forms of feedback such as conferencing, is an absolutely worthwhile investment in student motivation and hence engagement. English language teachers should carefully consider their strategies for the teaching of writing and giving of feedback, and become aware of the long-term impact that their feedback may have on student writing. The feedback that students receive on their writing may greatly affect their drive, enthusiasm, and general motivation towards English learning.

The students in this study give evidence that the incorporation of conferencing in the teaching and learning of English writing will improve the writing skills of students and through this improvement have an overall positive effect on their English language learning.

# Chapter 6

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This paper has made a strong case for the adoption of conferencing as part of the feedback given to students in English writing classes, both through the *Literature Review* and by the findings of the study, which clearly support this strategy. Although it is the hope of this researcher that this study will contribute to the body of knowledge about feedback mechanisms in second language writing courses in a constructive way, it is inevitable that any study will have certain limitations that need to be considered in any uptake of the findings. It is also true that findings will need to be corroborated by further research, in a range of contexts and settings. Similarly, this study, as with any other, opens up new avenues and opportunities of inquiry.

### 6.1 Limitations in the current study

While this study gave a clear finding that conferencing improves students' outcomes in writing, it should not be overlooked that the sample group was relatively restricted, both in terms of numbers, and in terms of the contexts which they represent. Results are promising, but it would be useful for these results to be corroborated with additional research by both teachers and researchers in a range of classrooms as they compare the results of written feedback with oral feedback.

This study was also confined to comparing written comments with the use of error codes and interactive feedback with the use of error codes. Perhaps future research could also document results for students who receive only interactive feedback

without using error codes. The *Literature Review* suggested that a mixed approach would give best results, but given that this area of research has received scant attention in the Hong Kong context, more extended research into different types of feedback would be useful for researchers and practitioners.

It should also be noted that this study was focused on whether the addition of conferencing as a feedback mechanism would improve students' outcomes. Although the study showed that this was certainly the case, there was no attention to how this improvement occurs. The interviews with students suggest that improved motivation may be part of the story, but this is inconclusive. Research into how improvement is achieved would be useful.

A final limitation relates to the timing of the study. Conferencing occurred out of school hours, and was over a relatively short period of school time. The use of after school hours was a predictable limitation as teachers are not easily able, under current conditions, to give up class time for research pursuits when they feel pressured to cover a set body of content.

## **6.2 Suggestions for further research**

The above limitations point to the need for further research.

### ***6.2.1 Research across a broad range of settings and contexts***

Care should be taken not to project the findings to all students, as contextual or cultural constraints may be operative for different groups of students. Therefore, this researcher suggests that further studies are implemented in a range of groups, across a range of

contexts. The existing evidence is confined to a particular year level in the secondary system. There was some attempt to broaden this with the inclusion of different proficiency levels and a different school in the follow-up interviews, but of course there is scope for this range to be broadened considerably, including the following contexts:

- ◆ Different year levels
- ◆ Different bands of secondary schools (where ‘bands’ designate students’ ability)
- ◆ Different sectors of schooling, including primary
- ◆ Different cultural groups in the Hong Kong context (e.g., students from non-Chinese speaking backgrounds)

While it is expected by this researcher that findings would be positive for all groups, this should be a tested, not an assumed belief. Moreover, it should be recognised that while results may be positive for all groups, the nature of conferences may be different for different groups, as was the case for the sample groups in this study in comparison with the ‘ideal’ stated in the *Literature Review*.

### ***6.2.2 Broaden the range of feedback options to be compared***

Given the possibility that different groups may react differently to conferencing and other modes of feedback, it would also be useful to broaden the types of feedback regimens under study to include interactive feedback only as one of the sample groups.

Apart from teacher-student conferencing as a mode of feedback, it is also worth trying out conferencing in a broader range of contexts, for example giving more autonomy to students by providing them with opportunities to have peer conferencing as an alternative mode of feedback. The theoretical basis of using peer response groups in the classroom is explained by Carson & Nelson (1994) as “the notion of collaborative learning which derives from the social constructionist view ... that knowledge is essentially a socially justified belief” (1994, p.17-18). Hairston (1986) claims that providing peer feedback is beneficial to both teachers and students (p.122). One of the main advantages is that student writers may feel less threatened if their classmates are the ones who comment on their work. At the same time, student writers may find it easier to identify the grammatical errors of other students rather than their own. Apart from writing simply for the teacher, peer feedback not only provides student writers a more varied and authentic audience but also develops the critical thinking skills of the student writers who, through careful reading and evaluating of their fellow students’ writing, can indirectly help themselves to become better editors. Students did talk about the peer assistance they sought and received when working on writing, and the inclusion of this as part of a research design would provide firm evidence for the inclusion of this or otherwise as a formal feedback strategy.

At the same time, there is scope to examine different kinds of written feedback as well as additional forms of feedback such as interactive conferences. Students gave very clear perspectives about the kinds of limitations they found in written feedback. Despite these limitations, though, students still think written feedback is useful to them. If the written

feedback in a study were to include clear advice and explanation, and if students were able to respond to written feedback with written queries, for example through some on-line format, it is possible that better results could be gained for written feedback. So while this researcher would never suggest that written feedback should be the only feedback strategy deployed, it would certainly be interesting to note the relative gains or otherwise associated with different quality written feedback.

In fact, it is worth conducting studies which attempt to analyse the form and nature of teacher feedback which are most likely to bring about successful revision of student texts, including the nature not only of written but also of interactive feedback. Ferris (2003) claimed that most studies on teachers' written response to L1 or L2 student writing put emphasis on the substance of teacher feedback rather than on how the feedback is constructed (for example, the use of linguistic form and tone, and the location of the teacher's commentary) (2003, p.24). Conrad & Goldstein (1999), for example, suggest that both the form and nature of teacher feedback play a crucial role in helping students understand, process, and utilise the teacher feedback. Therefore, it is worth conducting studies which investigate the form and nature of the problems to be revised in student writing and to see if the form and nature of teacher feedback can have a direct impact on students' successful revision of their texts.

### ***6.2.3 Explore how conferences achieve better writing results***

Although the data obtained through conducting the semi-structured interview and group interviews further corroborate the effectiveness of the use of teacher-student conferencing as a mode of feedback, it is recommended in future studies that student revisions of texts



be examined against conference transcripts to identify patterns of participation of each student and the influence of these patterns on the subsequent revision of student texts. Exploration and analysis of the interaction between teacher and students can also enable teachers to have a better understanding of how conferencing can help students to perform better in their writing and to learn for future writing opportunities.

#### ***6.2.4 Adjust the timing for studies on conferencing***

The reason for conducting teacher-student conferencing out-of-school-hours in this study was purely a pragmatic decision based on what was acceptable in particular school settings. However, as outlined in the discussion chapter, if conferencing is to be genuinely included as a feedback strategy, this must occur within school time. A research design that was able to link into conferences which were conducted as part of regularly timetabled lessons, could make important conclusions not only about the efficacy of the strategy, but also about the feasibility of its being incorporated into regular classroom time. Making time for this endeavour is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing teachers in Hong Kong in the deployment of the strategy, so any evidence about how this can be achieved and the results which are derived would be very helpful for the teaching profession. There is every reason to expect that results would be even greater when this strategy is an intrinsic and frequent component of students' writing experience, and data around this would usefully inform teaching practice.

At the same time, a longitudinal study would add interesting data to the study of this paper, with researchers examining if differences in results across groups experiencing different combinations of feedback options increase or remain static over time.

### **6.2.5 *Research into the overall writing approaches***

The *Literature Review* has outlined the link between conferencing as a feedback option and process approaches to writing. In this study, there was no attention to the overall writing programme, only to the nature of feedback within the existing writing programme. However, further research into the benefits for student outcomes not only of adjusting feedback, but of adjusting the overall approach to writing, is needed within the Hong Kong context. Zamel (1985) describes process approaches to writing as the writing of multiple drafts, with intermediate feedback to help students improve the content in-between drafts before providing them with form-based feedback for the end of the process (1985, p.86-87). Researchers should collect data on the writing outcomes of students in relation to the writing process; that is, in relation to the number of drafts, and the frequency and number of conferences offered per writing assignment. This study took a position supporting the provision of feedback on both meaning and form as per student need. This was based on the findings of Ashwell (2000) who revealed that it made little difference to students whether the feedback was simultaneous or consecutive, and those of Fathman & Whalley (1990) who also claimed that L2 students who received simultaneous feedback made greater improvement in writing than those who received feedback on meaning and then form. However, this is an untested notion in the Hong Kong context. As part of the exploration of the overall approach to writing, researchers could investigate whether teachers' attention to form and meaning separately or simultaneously make any difference in achieving improved student performance, developing confidence and arousing student interest in learning to write.

### **6.3 Involving students in decision making about feedback procedures**

It is all well and good for teachers to make research-based decisions about how and what they will do in classrooms, but it is useful to remember that students have an undeniable stake in all that happens in their classrooms. As such, it seems only reasonable and just that they have some input into the decision making processes. Conducting questionnaire surveys of students' views on teacher responses on a larger scale is one way to achieve this, as recommended by Ferris (2003) who stated that the information obtained could help to bring about "improved student motivation, better instructor understanding, and heightened communication between teacher and students" (2003, p.93). If writing teachers have a better understanding of the views of their students regarding their writing feedback, misunderstanding can be reduced if not avoided altogether. The better communication between teachers and students can lead to a more harmonious classroom environment, improved student motivation to write, and increased student confidence in their writing teachers to help them develop their writing competence. Surveys and studies of different aspects of teacher response can include the types of feedback teachers give to their students; students' preferences about the types of feedback they would like to receive; their reactions toward teacher feedback; the problems they have with teacher feedback; their strategies to process teacher commentary; and the impact of teacher feedback on the students' writing and their development as writers.

### **6.4 Conclusion**

This study has focused on some of the problems inherent in providing students with only written feedback for their writing, and has examined the use of interactive

discussions with students about their writing in conferences. This has contributed to the body of knowledge of teacher response to student writing and the impact which this has on student writing outcomes in the Hong Kong context. This fills a gap in current research, for as indicated in the *Introduction* and *Literature Review*, while research has been conducted on the benefits of conferencing as a means of feedback for first and second language learners of English in Western contexts with Western teachers, there has been little research on how well this applies to diverse contexts, and in particular, Hong Kong.

It is hoped that the findings will be used not only by researchers to increase their understanding of the nature of writing and writing feedback in the Hong Kong context, but also by teachers who want to make research-based decisions about the kinds of teaching practices that they apply in their classrooms. It is further hoped that this study can inspire others to continue research on the application of this strategy within the Hong Kong context, and a wider range of contexts, so that a consistent set of research findings can be established on which future research efforts and instructional practices can be built.

# Appendix 1

## 1. SAMPLE WRITING TASKS FOR THE PILOT STUDY

### 1.1 Writing topic for pre-test

**Write about 350 words on the following topic:**

The government wants to know what students think about the following problems they sometimes have at secondary schools in Hong Kong:

- Having no one to talk to about personal problems
- Unfair treatment from teachers
- Peer pressure from classmates
- Too much homework

You have been asked to write a report on at least **two** of these problems and suggest ways in which they can be solved.

Write your report.

## Appendix 2

### 2. MARKING SCHEME FOR THE PILOT STUDY

Each piece of student writing should both be assessed on a NINE point scale on both

**Content** and **Grammatical Accuracy** with a grade awarded to each of the categories:

+ Above Average —	+ Average —	+ Below Average —
987	654	321

Marks for content and grammatical accuracy should take the following into account:

#### **Content**

- Are the ideas in the writing relevant to the topic?
- Are the ideas logically organized and coherently presented in well-constructed paragraphs?
- Is the format of writing appropriate to the question?

#### **Grammatical accuracy**

- Is the vocabulary, including its variety and level of formality, appropriate to the writing topic?
- Is there the use of a variety of sentence types?

- How accurate is grammar, idiomatic usage, punctuation and spelling? To what extent does the student performance in these aspects interfere with his/her ability to communicate ideas?

Adapted from the marking scheme of the *Advanced Supplementary Examination, Use of English* (Section B), Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority.

## Appendix 3

### 3. SAMPLE WRITING TASK FOR THE MAIN STUDY

#### 3.1 Pre-test writing for main study

Below is part of a letter which your cousin Pat wrote to you. Read it carefully and write a reply in about 350 words. Give reasons for your advice. Begin your letter 'Dear Pat' and sign it 'Chris'.

I can't believe it. Last night I weighed myself and found out that I have gained 10 kilograms in the past six months! I feel really terrible about this. Maybe it's because I am now having my lunch in the canteen. And I am not going swimming anymore because my school work is taking up all of my spare time.

Is there any advice you can give me? I need your help.

Do write as soon as you can.

Love,

Pat



# Appendix 4

## 4. REVISED MARKING SCHEME FOR MAIN STUDY

### 4.1 Content

Score	Relevance	Coherence	Organisation
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fully address all parts of the task</li> <li>Presents a fully developed position in answer to the question with relevant, fully extended and well supported ideas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses cohesion in such a way that it attracts no attention.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Skillfully manages paragraphing</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sufficiently addresses all parts of the task</li> <li>Presents a well-developed response to the question with relevant, extended and supported ideas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manages all aspects of cohesion well</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Addresses all parts of the task</li> <li>Presents a clear position throughout the response</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presents, extends and supports main ideas, but there may be a tendency to over-generalise and/or supporting ideas may lack focus</li> <li>Uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately although there may be some under-/over-use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presents a clear central topic within each paragraph.</li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Addresses all parts of the task although some parts may be more fully covered than others. Presents a relevant position although conclusions may become unclear or repetitive</li> <li>Presents relevant main ideas but some may be inadequately developed/ unclear</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arranges information and ideas coherently and there is a clear overall progression</li> <li>Uses cohesive devices effectively but cohesion within and/or between sentences may be faulty or mechanical</li> <li>May not always use referencing clearly or appropriately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses paragraphing but not always logically</li> </ul>

<b>5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addresses the task only partially; the format may be inappropriate in places</li> <li>• Expresses a position but the development is not always clear and there may be no conclusions drawn</li> <li>• Presents some main ideas but these are limited and not sufficiently developed; there may be irrelevant detail</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes inadequate, inaccurate or over-use of cohesive devices</li> <li>• May be repetitive because of lack of referencing and substitution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents information with some organization but there may be a lack of overall progression</li> <li>• May not write in paragraphs, or paragraphing may be inadequate</li> </ul>
<b>4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responds to the task only in a minimal way or the answer is tangential; the format may be inappropriate</li> <li>• Presents a position but it is unclear</li> <li>• Presents some main ideas but these are difficult to identify and may be repetitive, irrelevant or not well-supported</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents information and ideas but these are not arranged coherently and there is no clear progression in the response</li> <li>• Uses some basic cohesive devices but these may be inaccurate or repetitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not write in paragraphs or there use may be confusing</li> </ul>
<b>3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not adequately address any part of the task</li> <li>• Does not address a clear position</li> <li>• Presents few ideas, which are largely undeveloped or irrelevant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not organize ideas logically</li> <li>• May use a very limited range of cohesive devices, and those used may not indicate a logical relationship between ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presents few ideas, which are largely undeveloped or irrelevant</li> <li>• Does not organize ideas logically</li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barely responds to the task</li> <li>• Does not express a position</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May attempt to present one or two ideas but there is no development</li> <li>• May use a very little range of cohesive devices, and those used may hardly indicate a logical relationship between ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May attempt to present one or two ideas but there is no development</li> <li>• Has very little control of organizational features</li> </ul>
<b>1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answer is completely unrelated to the task</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May use a very little range of cohesive devices, and those used may hardly indicate a logical relationship between ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answer is completely unrelated to the task</li> <li>• Fails to communicate any message</li> </ul>
<b>0</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fail to write anything</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fail to write anything</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fail to write anything</li> </ul>

## 4.2 Grammar (Language)

Score	Vocabulary	Language Use	Mechanics
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a wide range of vocabulary with very natural and sophisticated control of lexical features; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An excellent mastery of writing conventions, free from spelling, punctuation, capitalization errors</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings</li> <li>Skillfully uses uncommon lexical items but there may be occasional inaccuracies in word choice and collocation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a wide range of structures</li> <li>The majority of structures are error-free</li> <li>Makes only very occasional errors or inappropriacies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A good mastery of writing conventions with a few spelling, punctuation, capitalization errors</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision</li> <li>Uses less common lexical items with some awareness of collocation and style</li> <li>May produce occasional errors in word choice, spelling and/or word formation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a variety of complex structures</li> <li>Produced frequent error-free sentences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A sufficient mastery of writing conventions with a few spelling, punctuation, capitalization errors but meaning is not obscured</li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses an adequate range of vocabulary for the task</li> <li>Attempts to use less common vocabulary but with some inaccuracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a mix of simple and complex sentence forms</li> <li>Makes some errors in grammar and punctuation but they rarely reduce communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate an understanding of the writing conventions but some errors in grammar and punctuation which do not impede communication of ideas</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a limited range of vocabulary, but this is minimally adequate for the task</li> <li>May make noticeable errors in spelling and/or word formation that may cause some difficulty for the reader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses only a limited range of structures</li> <li>Attempts complex structures but these tend to be less accurate than simple sentences</li> <li>May make frequent grammatical errors and punctuation may be faulty; errors can cause some difficulty for the reader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May make frequent grammatical errors and punctuation may be faulty; errors can cause some difficulty for the reader</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses only basic vocabulary which may be used repetitively or which may be inappropriate for the task</li> <li>Has limited control of word formation and/or spelling; errors may cause strain for the reader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses only a very limited range of structures with only rare use of subordinate clauses</li> <li>Some structures are accurate but errors predominate, and punctuation is often faulty.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some structures are accurate but errors predominate, and punctuation is often faulty.</li> </ul>

<b>3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses only a very limited range of words and expressions with very limited control of word formation and/or spelling</li> <li>• Errors in lexis may severely distort the message</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attempts sentence forms but errors in grammar and punctuation predominate and distort the meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attempts sentence forms but errors in grammar and punctuation predominate and distort the meaning</li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses an extremely limited range of vocabulary; essentially no control of word formation and/or spelling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses an extremely limited range of vocabulary; essentially no control of word formation and/or spelling</li> <li>• Cannot use sentence forms except in memorized phrases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, a poor handwriting which confuses or obscures ideas conveyed</li> </ul>
<b>1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can only use a few isolated words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot use sentence forms at all.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No mastery of writing conventions, a piece of writing predominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing and illegible handwriting OR not enough to evaluate</li> </ul>
<b>0</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fail to write anything</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fail to write anything</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fail to write anything</li> </ul>

Adapted from Hughey, J. B. (1983) *Teaching ESL Composition: Principles and Techniques*, Wormuth, D.R., Hartfiel, V.F., Jacobs. H.L. and Zinkgraf, S.A. Rowley, MA: Newbury House p.140.

# Appendix 5

## 5. GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### 5.1 Students' reactions to different modes of feedback in writing, namely, written feedback or verbal feedback (conferencing)

- How do you usually feel after receiving your writing from the teacher, why?
- Which type of feedback, written or verbal feedback, do you usually receive from you teacher?
- Do you understand the written feedback of your teacher? Is the written feedback provided for you adequate to help you with the revision of your writing?
- What do you do if you have problems when doing the corrections of your writing?
- Do you want your teacher to provide you with individual feedback on a one-on-one basis to explain to you the problems in your writing?
- Have you ever received verbal feedback from your teacher? If yes, can you explain your feelings and describe your experiences.

### 5.2 Means of enhancing the effectiveness of English teachers' commentaries and students' revisions

- You have just been given verbal feedback, what aspects of verbal feedback do you think can benefit you most? Any problems with this kind of feedback?

- Can you give some examples to demonstrate how the use of verbal feedback can help you with the content of your writing?
- Can you also give some examples to demonstrate how the use of verbal feedback can help you with grammatical accuracy of your writing?
- Can you suggest some of the improvements that could be made to the teacher-student conferencing that you have just received?

### **5.3 Whether or not students' interest in learning English can be enhanced by improving their writing abilities**

- Do you think your interest in learning English can be enhanced with any improvement in your writing ability?
- With reference to your own experience, what are some of the things you would like to do if you have better English writing ability?

In the second interview, the first set of questions will not be used as context since relationships have already been established. The emphasis will be on checking for consistency of views, and noting any change in intensity or quality of themes or viewpoints.

# Appendix 6

## 6. RESULTS OF THE TESTS OF NORMALITY

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistics	df	p-value
Pre-test content total	0.959	34	0.226
Pre-test grammar total	0.958	34	0.207
Pre-test overall score	0.970	34	0.449
Writing 1 content total	0.964	34	0.322
Writing 1 grammar total	0.959	34	0.226
Writing 1 overall score	0.984	34	0.898
Writing 1 correction content total	0.949	34	0.116
Writing 1 correction grammar total	0.972	34	0.520
Writing 1 correction overall score	0.986	34	0.928
Writing 2 content total	0.984	34	0.879
Writing 2 grammar total	0.968	34	0.420
Writing 2 overall score	0.989	34	0.975
Writing 2 correction content total	0.926	34	0.024
Writing 2 correction grammar total	0.974	34	0.575
Writing 2 correction overall score	0.955	34	0.173
Writing 3 content total	0.966	34	0.352
Writing 3 grammar total	0.980	34	0.766
Writing 3 overall score	0.980	34	0.776
Writing 3 correction content total	0.951	34	0.131
Writing 3 correction grammar total	0.970	34	0.461
Writing 3 correction overall score	0.948	34	0.108
Writing 4 content total	0.912	34	0.010
Writing 4 grammar total	0.958	34	0.208
Writing 4 overall score	0.933	34	0.039
Writing 4 correction content total	0.942	34	0.069
Writing 4 correction grammar total	0.974	34	0.580
Writing 4 correction overall score	0.968	34	0.398
Post-test content total	0.957	34	0.193
Post-test grammar total	0.955	34	0.174
Post-test overall score	0.967	34	0.385

## Appendix 7

### 7. LIKERT SCALES FOR RESEARCHER DIARY NOTES FOR FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

#### 7.1 Group interview 1 (*From 1 to 5 with 1 indicating the weakest and 5 the strongest*)

##### 7.1.1 Tom (*Highest scoring student*)

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>		✓			
<b>Spontaneity</b>			✓		
<b>Confidence</b>			✓		
<b>Initiative</b>		✓			
<b>Extensive reply</b>		✓			

##### 7.1.2 Flora (*Mean scoring student*)

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>			✓		
<b>Spontaneity</b>				✓	
<b>Confidence</b>			✓		
<b>Initiative</b>			✓		
<b>Extensive reply</b>		✓			



### 7.1.3 Candy (Lowest scoring student)

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>	✓				
<b>Spontaneity</b>		✓			
<b>Confidence</b>	✓				
<b>Initiative</b>	✓				
<b>Extensive reply</b>	✓				

## 7.2 Group interview 2

### 7.2.1 Tom

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>			✓		
<b>Spontaneity</b>			✓		
<b>Confidence</b>				✓	
<b>Initiative</b>		✓			
<b>Extensive reply</b>			✓		

### 7.2.2 Flora

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>			✓		
<b>Spontaneity</b>			✓		
<b>Confidence</b>				✓	
<b>Initiative</b>				✓	
<b>Extensive reply</b>			✓		

### 7.2.3 Candy

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>	✓				
<b>Spontaneity</b>	✓				
<b>Confidence</b>	✓				
<b>Initiative</b>		✓			
<b>Extensive reply</b>	✓				

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# **Addendum 1**

## **1. WRITING TASKS FOR THE PILOT STUDY**

**Write about 350 words on the following topic:**

The government wants to know what students think about the following problems they sometimes have at secondary schools in Hong Kong:

- Having no one to talk to about personal problems
- Unfair treatment from teachers
- Peer pressure from classmates
- Too much homework

You have been asked to write a report on at least two of these problems and suggest ways in which they can be solved.

Write your report.

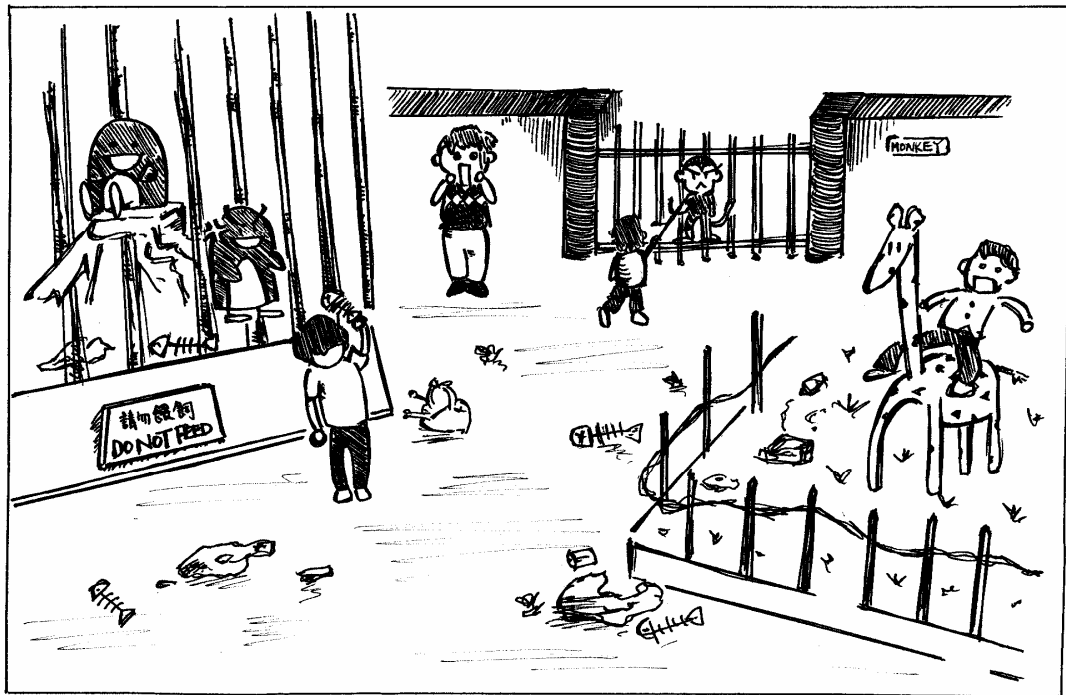
### **1.1 Writing topic for pilot assignment 1**

You visited a zoo on the mainland recently. You were shocked to see the terrible conditions in which the animals were kept and the way some of the visitors behaved.

You have decided to write a letter to the editor of a newspaper to draw the attention of the general public to the plight of the animals in this zoo. In your letter, you should



briefly describe what you saw and suggest ways to improve the living conditions of the animals in the zoo. Sign your name 'Tom Chan'.



The above pictures are adapted from Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination Syllabus B (2001): English Language Paper 1, Question 3, Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority.

## 1.2 Writing topic for pilot assignment 2

The following letter appeared in the newspaper, Hong Kong Post newspaper yesterday.

Last night, I watched a television programme about pollution in Hong Kong. It blamed cars and taxis for causing the pollution problem in the city and suggested that the number of cars on the road should be restricted. Also, it said that taxi fares should be raised to encourage people to take public transport

I disagree strongly with these views. I don't think cars are solely responsible for the problem of pollution in Hong Kong and it is unfair to deprive people of the freedom to own cars. Are there any other ways to solve the problem of pollution instead of just stopping people from owning cars in Hong Kong? What do other readers think?

Peter Smith

Write a letter of about 350 words to the editor of the newspaper discussing the causes of pollution in Hong Kong and suggest measures to solve this problem. Sign your name 'Chris Wong'. You do not need to write any address.

### **1.3 Writing topic for post-test**

You went on a package holiday tour to Japan with your family. The pictures below show some of the things that happened while you were there.

Write a letter of complaint of about 350 words to the editor of a newspaper, describing some of the problems you encountered and what you think should be done to solve these problems. Sign your name 'Chris Wong'.



The above pictures are adapted from *Mastering All-in-One* (2005) Practice Test 1, Paper 1 B (Task 2), Macmillan New Asia Publishers Ltd. p.140.

## Addendum 2

### 2. WRITING TASKS FOR THE MAIN STUDY

#### 2.1 Pre-test writing for the main study

Below is part of a letter which your cousin Pat wrote to you. Read it carefully and write a reply in about 350 words. Give reasons for your advice. Begin your letter 'Dear Pat' and sign it 'Chris'.

I can't believe it. Last night I weighed myself and found out that I have gained 10 kilograms in the past six months! I feel really terrible about this. Maybe it's because I am now having my lunch in the canteen. And I am not going swimming anymore because my school work is taking up all of my spare time.

Is there any advice you can give me? I need your help.

Do write as soon as you can.

Love,

Pat

#### 2.2 Writing topic for main study assignment 1

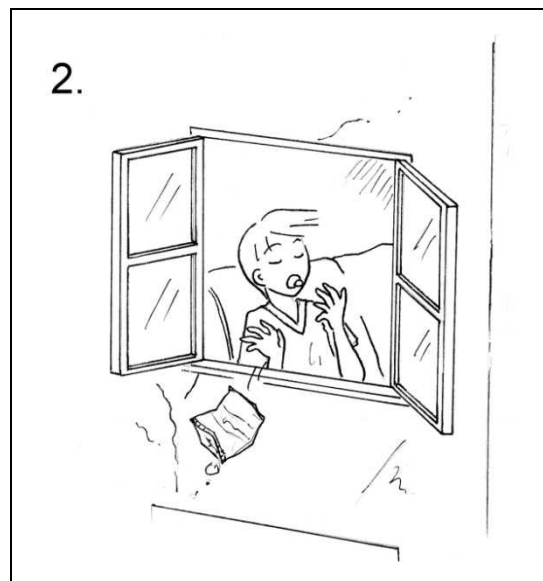
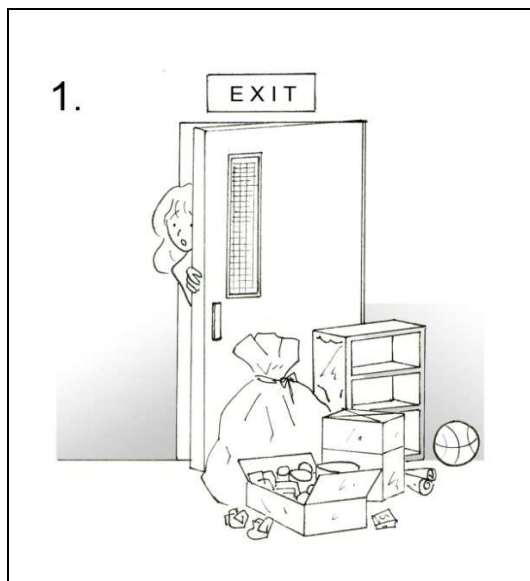
Your school has entered an inter-school debating contest. The debate will be based on the motion that 'Mobile phones should be banned in schools'. As you will not be informed whether you are for or against the motion until the day when you have the debate, you will have to prepare ideas for and against the motion. Write an essay in about 350 words discussing ideas for and against the motion.

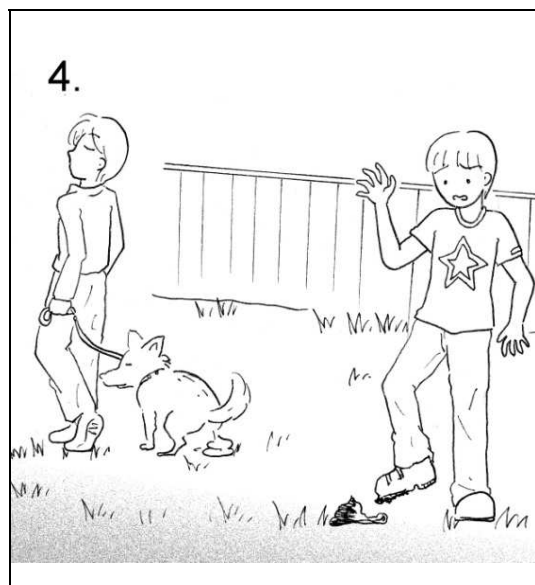
### 2.3 Writing topic for main study assignment 2

You are a member of the debating team and have been asked by your English teacher to take part in an inter-school debate competition. The motion is 'Heavier penalties is the best way to deter minibus drivers from speeding'. As you do not know which side you are on until the day of the competition, you have to prepare arguments both for and against the motion. Your teacher has asked you to write an essay to discuss ideas both for and against the motion. Write your essay in about 350 words.

### 2.4 Writing topic for main study assignment 3

You live in a block of flats in Tin Wan. The residents in your building are very inconsiderate and they have done various things which are damaging to the appearance of the building and the safety of the residents. You have identified some of the main problems (refer to the pictures below). Write a letter of complaint in about 350 words to the Chairperson of the Owners' Association and suggest to him ways to solve these problems.

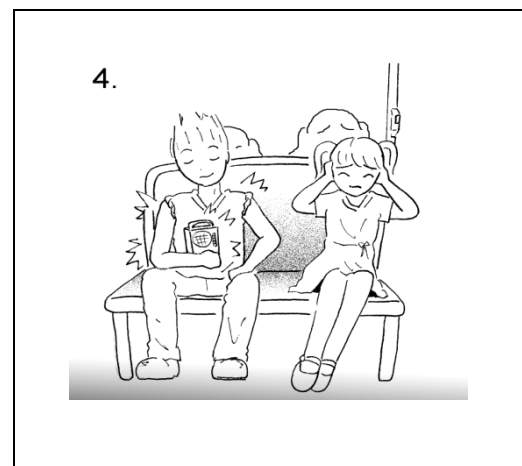
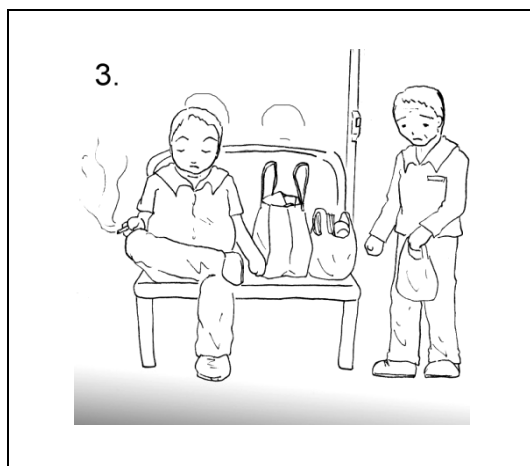
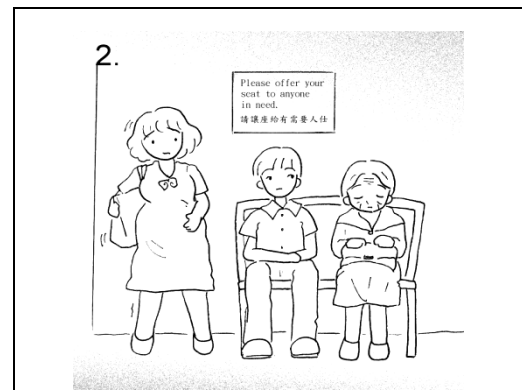




The above pictures are adapted from Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, (Syllabus A), 1992, Question 1 (c), Hong Kong Examinations Authority.

## 2.5 Writing topic for main study assignment 4

You are a senior officer of the Customers' Department of ABC Motor Bus Company. Your company is currently holding a courtesy campaign to encourage passengers to be more considerate. You took a trip on one of the company's buses to find out how successful the campaign was. The following were some of the things you saw when you were on the bus. Write a report in about 350 words to the manager of your department describing to him/her what you saw on the bus and suggest some ways the bus company can do to solve these problems. The following pictures may give you some ideas for your writing.



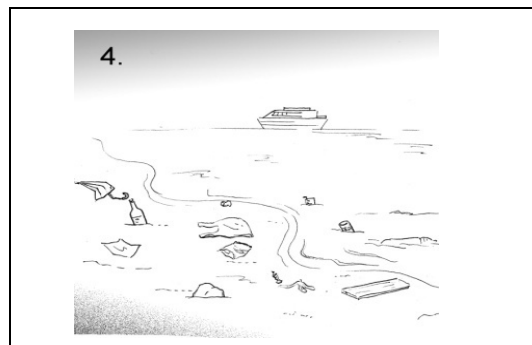
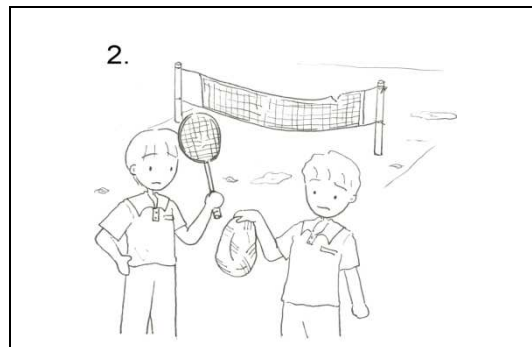
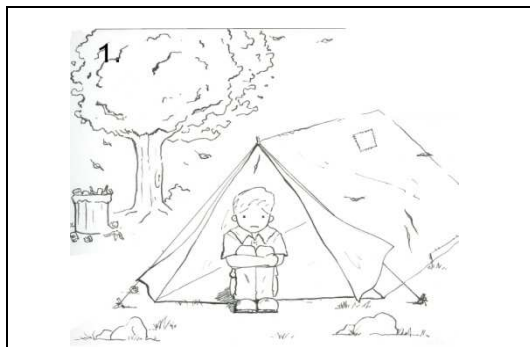
The above pictures are adapted from *Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (Syllabus B), Oral Examination*, 1991, picture 20, Hong Kong Examinations Authority.

## 2.6 Post-test writing topic for the main study

Write about 350 words on the following topic.

You were one of the first students from your school to go to a summer camp in the New Territories. The camp which lasted for three days was supposed to be a chance for students to relax and participate in some enjoyable sports activities. However, this was not the case.

With reference to the pictures below, write a letter of complaint to the camp's manager, Mr Wong, about the things that went wrong at the camp. You are strongly encouraged to include problems which have not been mentioned in the pictures. You also need to express how you felt at the camp and give some suggestions for improvement. Sign your name Chris Wong.



The above pictures are adapted from *Complete Exam Practice for Certificate English* (2000) Set 6, Paper 1, Question 3, Longman.



# Addendum 3

## 3. ERROR CODES USED FOR GIVING FEEDBACK TO STUDENTS

Error Type	Error Code	Explanation/Illustration
Organization	<i>org</i>	Ideas are not logically organized; fails to present a clear central topic.
Coherence	<i>coh</i>	Failure to indicate a logical relationship between ideas.
Relevance	<i>rel</i>	Ideas presented are not directly related to the topic and irrelevant details are included.
Tense/verb/voice	<i>t / vb / vo</i>	I <u>join</u> (t – 'joined') a student exchange programme last summer. Drinking and sleeping in the classroom <u>not allow</u> (vo – 'are not allowed').
Article/incorrect use of article	<i>art</i>	The (art – cross out article 'the') life in America was so different from Hong Kong.
Spelling	<i>sp</i>	There is a lot of rubbish on the <u>groung</u> (sp – 'ground').
Subject/missing subject	<i>sub</i>	Many students in Hong Kong are very busy, (missing subject – they) always complain about the amount of homework they have to do at home.
Agreement	<i>ag</i>	American <u>student</u> (ag – students) were very active.
Preposition	<i>prep</i>	I am very happy to write a letter <u>with</u> (prep – 'to') you.
Pronoun	<i>pro</i>	Mary is very inconsiderate and he (pro – 'she') likes to throw rubbish out of the window.
Noun	<i>n</i>	His selfish <u>behave</u> (n – 'behaviour') is unacceptable.
Adjective	<i>adj</i>	The teacher is not <u>satisfy</u> (adj – 'satisfied') with the performance of the students in the examination.
Adverb	<i>adv</i>	He runs very <u>quick</u> . (adv – 'quickly')
Wrong word	<i>ww</i>	The inconsiderate behaviour of the library users has some <u>affect</u> (ww – 'effect') on me.
Wrong expression	<i>w.exp.</i>	<u>My life is very well</u> (rewrite – 'I am very well'). You do not have to worry about me.
Extra word(s)	<i>ext.</i>	How are you? 'I have not seen you for a long time. I miss you so <u>(extra word)</u> very much.

# Addendum 4

## 4. ESSAY SAMPLES FOR CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS

### 4.1 Essay sample 1

A sample essay from writing task 3 (see Addendum 2.4 for the writing topic) using error codes (Addendum 3) and written comments given for a student in the control group.

#### A Complaint Letter

Dear Mr Chan,

I'm writing this letter to complain about the attitude of the residents in the building which I'm living in. As <sup>pro</sup> they are very inconsiderate by putting lots of <sup>ww</sup> sundries at the entrance of the back stair. And <sup>pro</sup> that means the fire exit <sup>vb</sup> being blocked, which <sup>ag</sup> endanger the residents lives. <sup>ww</sup> Nevertheless, some residents <sup>t</sup> are throwing rubbish out of the window. And this may endanger the lives of the people on the street. Also, some of them <sup>t</sup> are drawing graffiti on the wall of the building which <sup>vb (ag)</sup> are damaging to the appearance of the building. And the most disgusting thing is that, the residents <sup>vb</sup> are <sup>vb</sup> bring their dog urinate at the backyard of the building <sup>ext.</sup> and without cleaning up the <sup>coh</sup> dog waste. This will multiply virus, <sup>vb</sup> affecting the health and the living environment of the residents.

In order to solve these problems, I suggest that we should take action by warning those misbehaved residents. <sup>ww</sup> Posing notice or poster warning and <sup>ww</sup> remaining the residents that those behavior is not allowed, or <sup>coh</sup> else they are breaking the law, as blocking the fire exit, throwing object from the height, etc is illegal.

## Comments

The content is relevant to the topic. However, you need to pay attention to the following:

- Write complete sentences, with one subject and one main verb for each sentence.  
Avoid starting a sentence with 'And'.
- Pay attention to your choice of vocabulary, i.e. 'hire a taxi'; 'employ people'.
- Check the use of present continuous tense; i.e. is/am/are + verb(ing).
- Ideas must be coherent: if dogs urinate at the backyard of the building, it would be impossible for the dog owners to pick up the dog waste.

### **4.2 Essay sample 2**

A sample essay from writing task 4 (see Addendum 2.5 for the writing topic) using error codes (Addendum 3) and teacher-student conferencing for a student in the experimental group.

## A Report on the Courtesy Campaign

In order to find out how successful our courtesy campaign was, I took a trip on the bus last Monday morning. As I went on the bus, I found a seat which was near the door and <sup>sub</sup>started my trip.

<sup>coh</sup>On the ground that it was <sup>art</sup>an peak hour for students or workers, so the bus was full of passengers. When the bus <sup>vo</sup>was stopped, there was a long queue <sup>coh</sup>out of the bus. Some passengers <sup>vo</sup>were jumped the queue when they <sup>ww</sup>entered <sup>prep</sup>into the bus. One of them <sup>w. exp.</sup>found out coins from his wallet <sup>ww</sup>besides the coin box and wasted a lot of time. <sup>pro</sup>We needed nearly ten minutes for passengers to <sup>vb (ww)</sup>entrance into the bus.

On the way, I was surprised to see that a pregnant woman, who was <sup>sp</sup>carring a baby, standing in a crowded <sup>ww</sup>environment. No passengers were willing to give up <sup>pro</sup>a seat to the pregnant woman. They <sup>ext</sup>were just sat down and pretended <sup>art</sup>a woman was not <sup>ww</sup>here. <sup>pro</sup>It was such inconsiderate and they <sup>vb</sup>were lack a sense of sympathy.

On the other side there was a man who was sitting at the back. He was smoking in the bus and did not care any notice although there was penalty towards smoking people. Despite <sup>prep</sup>of an old man standing next to him, he still put his belongings on the seat. He did not <sup>vb</sup>considerate other passengers and it was a selfish behavior. When the trip was <sup>vb</sup>being end, I heard some noise coming from the back. A young man <sup>vb</sup>had turn on his radio loudly and <sup>sub / vb</sup>very disturbing to those passengers. It was so annoying and <sup>art</sup>a inconsiderate behavior.

In this one hour trip, I saw so many passengers <sup>vb</sup>were without courtesy. Lots of improvement needed to be made in <sup>art</sup>bus.

To solve the problem of finding coins, buses <sup>vo</sup>could be install an octopus machine in order to <sup>vb</sup>saving time. It would be <sup>sp</sup>convient to all passengers <sup>prep</sup>during anytime. Also, more <sup>ag</sup>notice should be <sup>vb</sup>post on bus. Attention should be drawn to passengers, they need to give seat <sup>prep</sup>both <sup>art</sup>disables and pregnant <sup>ag</sup>woman. Besides, <sup>ww</sup>right should be given to the bus <sup>sp</sup>drives, so that they can <sup>ww</sup>order those passengers who break the <sup>sp</sup>regonition to follow the rules <sup>ww</sup>correctly.

If the solution can be <sup>vb</sup>carry out, these problems can be <sup>vb</sup>solve quickly and <sup>w. exp.</sup>maintain the courtesy campaign.

(422 words)

# Addendum 5

## 5. WRITING SCORES FOR PRE AND POST TESTS

### 5.1 Experimental group ~ Pre-test

Experimental Group			Pre-Test								Overall Score
			Content (27)				Language Accuracy (27)				
Class	Class No.	Name of Student	Relevance	Coherence	Organization	Total	Vocabulary	Language use	Mechanics	Total	
6A	1	A	6	6	5	17	5	4	5	14	31
6A	2	B	4	3	4	11	3	3	4	10	21
6A	3	C	4	4	5	13	4	4	3	11	24
6A	4	D	4	4	5	13	4	4	5	13	26
6S	5	E	4	5	4	13	5	4	5	14	27
6S	6	F	4	4	5	13	4	4	3	11	24
6S	7	G	4	5	4	13	4	4	4	12	25
6S	8	H	3	4	4	11	3	3	4	10	21
6S	9	I	4	3	3	10	4	3	3	10	20
6S	10	J	4	4	5	13	3	3	4	10	23
6S	11	K	3	4	4	11	3	2	3	8	19
6S	12	L	4	4	4	12	3	3	4	10	22
6S	13	M	5	4	5	14	4	4	4	12	26
6S	14	N	5	5	5	15	4	4	5	13	28
6S	15	O	4	4	5	13	4	3	5	12	25
6S	16	P	3	5	5	13	4	5	5	14	27
6S	17	Q	4	3	4	11	3	4	4	11	22

## 5.2 Experimental group ~ Post-test

Experimental Group			Post-Test								Over-all Score
			Content (27)				Language Accuracy (27)				
Class	Class No.	Name of Student	Relevance	Coherence	Organization	Total	Vocabulary	Language use	Mechanics	Total	
6A	1	A	6	7	7	20	6	6	6	18	38
6A	2	B	6	5	6	17	5	4	5	14	31
6A	3	C	4	5	5	14	5	5	4	14	28
6A	4	D	5	5	5	15	5	5	5	15	30
6S	5	E	6	6	7	19	6	6	6	18	37
6S	6	F	5	5	5	15	5	5	5	15	30
6S	7	G	5	5	5	15	4	4	5	13	28
6S	8	H	5	4	4	13	5	4	4	13	26
6S	9	I	4	5	5	14	4	4	4	12	26
6S	10	J	4	4	6	14	4	5	5	14	28
6S	11	K	4	4	4	12	4	5	4	13	25
6S	12	L	4	4	5	13	5	4	5	14	27
6S	13	M	5	4	5	14	4	4	5	13	27
6S	14	N	6	6	6	18	4	5	5	14	32
6S	15	O	5	1	5	14	4	4	5	13	27
6S	16	P	5	6	6	17	5	5	5	15	32
6S	17	Q	5	4	5	14	4	4	5	13	27

### 5.3 Control group ~ Pre-test

Control Group			Pre-Test								Over- all Score
			Content (27)				Language Accuracy (27)				
Class	Class No.	Name of Student	Relevance	Coherence	Organization	Total	Vocabulary	Language use	Mechanics	Total	
6A	1	A	5	5	4	14	4	4	4	12	26
6A	2	B	5	4	4	13	4	4	4	12	25
6A	3	C	5	3	4	12	4	4	4	12	24
6A	4	D	4	4	4	12	3	3	3	9	21
6A	5	E	4	4	3	11	3	3	4	10	21
6A	6	F	5	5	5	15	4	4	4	12	27
6A	7	G	4	5	3	12	4	4	4	12	24
6A	8	H	3	3	5	11	3	3	4	10	21
6A	9	I	5	6	6	17	5	4	4	13	30
6A	10	J	4	4	5	13	4	4	4	12	25
6S	11	K	4	4	4	12	4	3	5	12	24
6S	12	L	4	3	3	10	4	3	3	10	20
6S	13	M	5	5	5	15	4	4	4	12	27
6S	14	N	5	4	4	13	4	5	4	13	26
6S	15	O	3	3	4	10	4	4	4	12	22
6S	16	P	5	4	4	13	3	3	5	11	24
6S	17	Q	5	4	5	14	4	4	4	12	26

#### 5.4 Control group ~ Post-test

Control Group			Post-Test								Over- all Score
			Content (27)				Language Accuracy (27)				
Class	Class No.	Name of Student	Relevance	Coherence	Organization	Total	Vocabulary	Language use	Mechanics	Total	
6A	1	A	6	6	6	18	4	5	5	14	32
6A	2	B	6	5	4	15	5	4	4	13	28
6A	3	C	5	4	5	14	5	4	5	14	28
6A	4	D	4	4	4	12	4	3	3	10	22
6A	5	E	5	5	5	15	4	4	5	13	28
6A	6	F	6	5	5	16	5	4	5	14	30
6A	7	G	4	4	5	13	4	5	5	14	27
6A	8	H	4	4	5	13	4	4	4	12	25
6A	9	I	5	6	6	17	5	6	5	16	33
6A	10	J	5	5	5	15	4	5	4	13	28
6S	11	K	5	4	5	14	5	3	5	13	27
6S	12	L	6	5	6	17	6	6	5	17	34
6S	13	M	5	5	5	15	5	4	5	14	29
6S	14	N	5	5	5	15	4	5	4	13	28
6S	15	O	6	4	5	15	4	4	5	13	28
6S	16	P	5	4	5	14	4	5	4	14	28
6S	17	Q	5	5	5	15	5	4	4	13	28



# Addendum 6

## 6. OVERALL SCORES AND COMPONENT SCORES FOR WRITING TESTS

Test (N = 34)	Relevance	Coherence	Organisation	Content Total	Vocabulary	Language Use	Mechanics	Grammar Total	Overall Scores
Mean (SD)									
<b>Pre-test</b>	4.5 (0.46)	4.3 (0.62)	4.3 (0.52)	13.1 (1.36)	4.2 (0.53)	3.81 (0.55)	4.0 (0.51)	11.9 (1.26)	25.1 (2.41)
<b>Writing 1</b>	4.7 (0.47)	4.1 (0.57)	4.4 (0.49)	13.1 (1.24)	4.2 (0.62)	3.9 (0.65)	3.6 (0.60)	11.7 (1.68)	24.9 (2.77)
<b>Writing 1 Correction</b>	5.7 (0.79)	5.2 (0.95)	5.3 (0.80)	16.1 (2.39)	5.3 (0.74)	4.9 (0.73)	4.7 (0.74)	14.9 (2.07)	31.0 (4.23)
<b>Writing 2</b>	4.4 (0.66)	4.0 (0.63)	4.1 (0.57)	12.5 (1.63)	4.2 (0.57)	3.9 (0.69)	3.9 (0.64)	11.9 (1.76)	24.4 (3.23)
<b>Writing 2 Correction</b>	5.6 (1.00)	5.2 (0.79)	5.1 (0.70)	15.8 (2.31)	5.4 (0.83)	4.9 (0.77)	4.9 (0.73)	15.2 (2.27)	31.0 (4.45)
<b>Writing 3</b>	4.7 (0.49)	4.2 (0.50)	4.4 (0.46)	13.3 (1.15)	4.5 (0.54)	4.0 (0.56)	4.0 (0.65)	12.5 (1.56)	25.8 (2.43)
<b>Writing 3 Correction</b>	5.8 (0.86)	5.2 (0.73)	5.2 (0.75)	16.3 (2.22)	5.2 (0.71)	4.9 (0.66)	4.9 (0.67)	15.0 (1.90)	31.3 (3.89)
<b>Writing 4</b>	4.8 (0.52)	4.5 (0.63)	4.7 (0.56)	14.0 (1.52)	4.5 (0.71)	4.3 (0.72)	4.2 (0.61)	13.0 (1.88)	27.0 (3.23)
<b>Writing 4 Correction</b>	5.8 (1.01)	5.4 (0.89)	5.6 (0.84)	16.8 (2.62)	5.6 (0.98)	5.2 (0.75)	5.2 (0.84)	16.0 (2.42)	32.8 (4.83)
<b>Post-test</b>	5.9 (1.19)	5.4 (0.98)	5.3 (0.85)	16.7 (2.91)	5.5 (1.06)	5.0 (0.84)	5.1 (0.86)	15.7 (2.64)	32.4 (5.41)

# Addendum 7

## 7. TRANSCRIPTIONS OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS (6)

### 7.1 Transcript for Harry: Highest scoring student — Experimental group

#### The meaning of codes

Positive about written f'back	+W	Positive about writing English	+E
Negative about written f'back	XW	Negative about writing English	XE
Neutral about written f'back	(W)	Neutral about writing English	E
Positive about verbal f'back	+V		
Negative about verbal f'back	XV		
Neutral about verbal f'back	(V)		

N.B. The common introduction in which the purpose of the interview was given, and student permissions gained, has not been included in the transcript.

	Exchanges	Comments
<b>Teacher</b>	So, Harry, I'd like to know how long you have been learning English	~ The interviewer begins with relationship building conversation to put the students at ease.
<b>Harry</b>	I have been learning English for thirteen years.	
<b>Teacher</b>	What do you think of your English level at this stage? You have learnt English for quite a long time, what do you think of your language proficiency of this stage?	
<b>Harry</b>	I think I can speak fluent English and write without many grammatical mistakes.	+E ~ Student seems to be quite confident with his language proficiency ~ Focus on mistakes rather than communication
<b>Teacher</b>	So which do you think is the most difficult skill that you have to learn?	
<b>Harry</b>	I think writing is the most difficult skill.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Why do you think so?	

<b>Harry</b>	It's because it takes so long time to improve the writing skill. I have to read more and write more to do so, this skill can never be easily improved!	~ Identifies link between reading and writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	Tell me about how you have been taught writing.	
<b>Harry</b>	When studying in the secondary school, the teachers always wanted us to do many exercises on textbooks, and the exercises mainly focused on grammar. They always told us good writing was based on good grammar. Sometimes, they called us to play computer games, or games such as scrabble, to let us learn more vocabularies because vocabularies are important elements in an essay. Therefore, it is very interesting to learn writing in the secondary schools.	(W) +E ~ Link between good grammar and good writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	When teachers asked you to do an essay in the class room, how did you feel?	
<b>Harry</b>	I didn't like to do writing during English lessons when studying in the lower forms because I thought it was boring and time-consuming, I could not improve writing within a short time.	XE
<b>Teacher</b>	You didn't like writing when studying in the lower forms, so how did you improve your English later then?	
<b>Harry</b>	When studying in the higher forms, I frequently read newspapers and learnt a lot of vocabularies. Afterwards, I tried to use the vocabularies I had learnt in writing and found that writing was very interesting, so I didn't hate to write anymore.	+E ~ Link between extended vocabulary and good writing. ~ Self motivated learner
<b>Teacher</b>	How about now when you do an essay of 500 words, do you think it is difficult?	
<b>Harry</b>	Not very difficult now.	+E
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you have any problems you have to write such a long essay?	
<b>Harry</b>	First, I think it is difficult to proofread the essay to ensure it has no grammatical mistakes. Second, I may write something that is not relevant to the topic. Third, I may wrongly use vocabularies in the essay. And the most important is that I can not write smoothly and quickly.	~ Identifies range of aspects of writing: relevance, coherence & vocabulary. No mention of grammar.
<b>Teacher</b>	What would help you write better essays?	

<b>Harry</b>	I think I need to organise the essay quickly because it costs me so long time to think about the contents.	~ Focus on meaning, not form.
<b>Teacher</b>	So how about each time when you receive your essay after the teacher has marked your work, how do you feel?	
<b>Harry</b>	If the teacher gives me a good mark, I'll feel very happy. However, if I get negative comments, I may escape from the reality and just ignore the whole thing.	(W) ~ Good marks: happy; low marks: escape from reality.
<b>Teacher</b>	What kinds of changes might you make after you get the feedback?	
<b>Harry</b>	I will rewrite it.	~ Not able to articulate specific changes
<b>Teacher</b>	With what kinds of changes?	
<b>Harry</b>	I will try to make it different.	~ Not able to articulate specific changes
<b>Teacher</b>	How about the kinds of feedback the teachers may give you? What kinds of feedback do you usually receive?	
<b>Harry</b>	The teachers usually give me written feedback. They just tell me what I should improve, and never praise me!	XW ~ Identifies praise as important; but not present in written feedback.
<b>Teacher</b>	No teachers have ever praised you?	
<b>Harry</b>	Not many teachers ever praised me before. They just pointed out the problems I must solve.	XW ~ Reinforces lack of praise.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do the teachers give you both verbal feedback and written feedback?	
<b>Harry</b>	Yes, they often give me written feedback.	(W) ~ Indicates yes, but elaborates that this is written feedback.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do they have time to see you one by one?	
<b>Harry</b>	Not often, because the teachers would have to give all the students feedback verbally.	~ Expresses doubt that teachers could/would offer individual verbal feedback.
<b>Teacher</b>	So which feedback do you receive most?	
<b>Harry</b>	Written feedback.	

<b>Teacher</b>	Do you think the written feedback is useful?	
<b>Harry</b>	I think the comments written by teachers never point out all mistakes. Maybe there is not much space on the paper, teachers cannot write many sentences.	<p>XW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Indicates inadequacy of written feedback: unable to identify all mistakes.</li> <li>~ Focus on 'mistakes' in feedback; feedback and identification of errors</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	So what do you change in your writing after you get the feedback?	
<b>Harry</b>	For corrections, I may check dictionary myself and go to the libraries to find reference books. And sometimes I may search the internet to find model essays so that I can copy some good sentences from the essays for the corrections.	<p>(W)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Number of strategies at his disposal for re-writing.</li> <li>~ Does not address the 'what' of change, just the how.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	Instead of asking teachers the next day?	
<b>Harry</b>	I think teachers may not have time to help me solve the problems. And I can do it myself.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Perceived inappropriacy of demanding more individual attention from teacher.</li> <li>~ Independent learner.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you often seek help from your classmates if you have problems?	
<b>Harry</b>	Not at all. They are often not sure if they are correct or not.	<p>(W)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Does not access peer support. High proficiency students may not be secure in the abilities of other students to help them.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you find that the written feedback helps you do a better job next time when you have to write?	
<b>Harry</b>	I think more improvement will be shown if the teachers verbally remind me what problems I have to solve. However, improvement does not only depend on verbal feedback from teachers, I have to find more information myself on internet or from library so as to improve my writing skills.	<p>+V</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Also indicates a high level of self-responsibility for improvement.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	What suggestions could you make for a teacher who wants to improve the feedback on writing to help students more?	

<b>Harry</b>	I would like my teacher to go through the paper with me, but I know it can't happen. They are too busy. I know. More examples are helpful. I like when I see lots of examples. I do this myself too.	+V ~ Suggests a high level of one-to-one interaction; not just problems, but going through the whole paper.
<b>Teacher</b>	When could the teacher show you the examples?	
<b>Harry</b>	Before we write is best, but also in the feedback. Showing me what I could do.	(W) ~ Wants more feedback, modeling, but does not indicate if this is written or verbal.
<b>Teacher</b>	And what do you mean when you say 'go through'?	
<b>Harry</b>	My teacher can say, 'This bit is good. This bit is not good.' I can ask for ideas. I can ask the teacher to explain and show me an example.	+V ~ Indicates need to know what is being done well. ~ Need for specific feedback and modelling. ~ Implies verbal interaction if the teacher is to explain.

End of Transcript

## Summary

Harry is able to make good use of the written feedback he receives, although he makes a case for verbal feedback as well, and does not actually say anything positive about the written feedback he receives, rather points out deficiencies. A noticeable feature of his interview is his degree of self-direction, which makes it possible for him to work with whatever feedback the teacher provides. He tends to devote more time in this interview to describing his own writing habits and processes than he does on the actual feedback.

Even with this high degree of self-regulation and direction, he would appreciate more teacher input on his work in progress, as evidenced by his final comments. Rather

than being focused on verbal or written – although he implies verbal – his emphasis is in the process of writing more so than the product. He would like input as he is writing. This in itself is an endorsement of conferencing, but in a larger sense than just feedback.

### **Overall**

- Endorses written feedback, although he would like more input.
- Positive attitude about verbal feedback is expressed.
- High motivation is already evident for this student as manifested in his high level of self-regulation. His motivation and success are linked, although which one leads to which is a circular argument.

### **Tally for comments**

Positive about written f'back	0	Positive about writing English	4
Negative about written f'back	3	Negative about writing English	1
Neutral about written f'back	6	Neutral about writing English	0
Positive about verbal f'back	3		
Negative about verbal f'back	0		
Neutral about verbal f'back	0		

## 7.2 Transcript for Carrie: Mean scoring student — Experimental group

### The meaning of codes

Positive about written f'back	+W	Positive about writing English	+E
Negative about written f'back	XW	Negative about writing English	XE
Neutral about written f'back	(W)	Neutral about writing English	E
Positive about verbal f'back	+V		
Negative about verbal f'back	XV		
Neutral about verbal f'back	(V)		

N.B. The common introduction in which the purpose of the interview was given, and student permissions gained, has not been included in the transcript.

	Exchanges	Comments
<b>Teacher</b>	How do you feel when you have a writing task to do?	
<b>Carrie</b>	I don't think about it much. We have to do writing, so I do it.	E
<b>Teacher</b>	Ok. Carrie, can you tell me how you feel each time when your essay is returned to you?	
<b>Carrie</b>	Um ... I think I mainly will have some negative feeling because I will always get a poor mark. And the comment always could be some poor comments to point out some mistakes for my assignment.	XW ~ Feeling bad about writing because she always obtains low marks and receives poor comments from the teacher.
<b>Teacher</b>	So, can you learn from the comment of the teacher?	
<b>Carrie</b>	I just can know what the mistake I made in my assignment is but I don't know how to improve and how poor my assignment is.	XW ~ Doesn't know how to correct the mistakes pointed out by the teacher; a sense of helplessness prevails because she doesn't know how poor her writing is nor does she know how to make improvement to her writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	Tell me about the feedback that you get.	
<b>Carrie</b>	Yes, each paper has the written feedback from the	XW



	teacher. But they are also mainly very general comment such as poor organization of ideas, poor conjunction between the paragraphs, the grammatical mistakes. But just some general ideas I think.	~ Written comments are too general.
<b>Teacher</b>	So what kind of feedback would be helpful for you?	
<b>Carrie</b>	I think the verbal feedback from the teacher is more effective for me, because through the verbal feedback, the teacher can give some specific explanation for the mistakes to the students. And clarify each mistake to the student more clearly. And there will have more interactive explanation between teacher and student.	+V
<b>Teacher</b>	So you like the chance to get more detail from the teacher?	
<b>Carrie</b>	Yes, and I think it helps me for my content because, for the other aspects such as the spelling and grammar mistake, I think I can improve it by myself such as ... in the society, there may be many books to teach us how the grammar can be improved. But, for the content and how to organise our ideas, the books, those books cannot have a very effective way to improve. But through the teacher-student feedback, the teacher can explain directly and guide the student to improve their ideas and organize their ideas themselves. I think this is very important for students. And I think the verbal feedback is very useful to build up a trustful relationship between teacher and students, because if the teacher talks more to the students in the leisure time through the feedback, I think the relationship can be built up gradually. And then after the relationship has been built up, the students can express their ideas and express their problems without any feelings of embarrassment. I think this is very important for students.	+V Extensive outline of benefits: ~ Content of writing ~ Teacher-student relationship building ~ Scope for questions in stress-free environment
<b>Teacher</b>	Is there anything you don't like about conferences?	
<b>Carrie</b>	I only like it if I like the teacher.	(V) ~ Good relationship identified as a factor in making conferencing successful.

<b>Teacher</b>	Now you have been given verbal feedback for your writing for a few sessions instead of receiving the written feedback for the teacher.	
<b>Carrie</b>	Hm ...	
<b>Teacher</b>	Which do you prefer?	
<b>Carrie</b>	I think verbal feedback will help me improve my English. First, I think, through this teacher-student feedback session, a closer relationship is built because I have more chance to communicate with my English teacher. Before those sessions, I may have felt embarrassed to express my problem and to ask my teacher to give me some suggestions. But now I will feel more willing to express my problem to my English teacher and ask her to give me some suggestions to improve my English. Second, I think it will provide me some positive reinforcement because in these teacher-student feedback sessions, the teacher provides a way on how to improve and how to correct my problem, and I think this advice gives me and helps me develop some confidence in improving my English. I think this will be a drive to motivate myself to improve my English.	+V ~ Repeats relationship building aspect ~ Safe/supportive environment within which to ask questions
<b>Teacher</b>	A drive to motivate yourself? Can you explain?	
<b>Carrie</b>	Um ... I will think of the ideas and suggestions, and after I will know which part I need to improve, I will try to improve myself by reading some books, some newspapers, and some materials about English and improve my English myself.	+V ~ Links conferencing to overall motivation to direct own learning (genuine?)
<b>Teacher</b>	Ok. So instead of just relying on the teacher, you take the initiative to learn English yourself because you have both interest and confidence.	
<b>Carrie</b>	Ah, yes.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Can you tell me what you think about written feedback?	
<b>Carrie</b>	I think, in the reality, I think the teacher is really have not enough time to give every student with verbal feedback. So if only give the written feedback, they may provide general ideas and general comments to student about which part of English skill they need to improve. But disadvantage of the written feedback is the	XW ~ Comments too general to lead to effective redraft. ~ Expresses skepticism that teachers have time to give individual attention in conferences.

	comment is really sometimes very general. The student may not have the idea about how to improve this part of weaknesses. So I think this may be the disadvantage of written feedback. (Short pause) I have a vocabulary notebook and I jot down vocabulary I am not familiar with and I look up the meaning of unfamiliar words in the dictionary at home.	~ Independent learning strategies
<b>Teacher</b>	So if you are given a choice between written feedback and verbal feedback, which do you prefer?	~ Answer implied earlier, but not given directly.
<b>Carrie</b>	I will prefer verbal feedback if the teacher can do it. Because the verbal feedback can give some more clear explanations about the weaknesses of students. In the more face to face feedback from the teacher, the student can know how to improve it by asking suggestions from the teacher. The teacher can give some guidance to students how to improve their English. And for example about the poor organisation of the ideas, the teacher can discuss a piece of paper, the piece of essay with student, and teach them how to improve and how to organize the ideas in a better way. I think this is more effective in improving English.	+V ~ Clear explanations ~ Chance to ask questions ~ Again qualified by skepticism about teachers' being able to do it
<b>Teacher</b>	How will you do corrections if you don't have enough information in your feedback?	
<b>Carrie</b>	I do my best. If I don't have corrections from the teacher, I will leave it.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Would you ask the teacher for help?	
<b>Carrie</b>	If the teacher is near me, maybe I will ask. Usually no.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Does your teacher accumulate students' mistakes and tell the whole class to discuss the problems?	
<b>Carrie</b>	No, the teacher doesn't do that.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Can you give suggestions to teachers to help students perform better in writing?	
<b>Carrie</b>	The teacher should try to mark in greater detail. I understand that teachers have lots of paper to mark but they should try to focus on the weaknesses of individual students.	(W) ~ Need for more detail/more individualized comment in written feedback.

<b>Teacher</b>	So written feedback is beneficial to you?	
<b>Carrie</b>	Verbal feedback is better for me. However, I understand teachers are very busy. They won't have the time to provide individual feedback to students. So more detail in written feedback is helpful.	+V ~ Reiterates the advantages of verbal feedback. ~ Reiterates skepticism at individual attention from the teacher. ~ Doesn't answer if written feedback is helpful; qualifies with what it should be like.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you think that your interest and motivation in learning English can be enhanced with the improvement in your writing ability?	
<b>Carrie</b>	I am sure that this will be the case because I receive the encouragement that I can do something, I will have greater incentive to learn English.	

End of Transcript

## Summary

Carrie demonstrates a fairly intense desire to have verbal feedback from the writing teacher, referring to the chance to get more individual feedback and also to build a stronger relationship with the teacher. Among the advantages for verbal feedback she claims that the individual attention from the teacher can better motivate her to learn English. Throughout the interview, she seems to be quite negative about receiving just written feedback from the teacher, mainly because the feedback tends to be too general to be helpful. At the same time she is realistic about what she sees as the unlikelihood that teachers will have or will make time to give all students individual feedback.

## Overall

Written feedback seems only able to provide some general comments, failing to

- provide specific explanations about writing issues; positive attitude about verbal feedback is expressed;
- focuses heavily on relationship aspect of conferencing.

## Tally for comments

Positive about written f'back	0	Positive about writing English	0
Negative about written f'back	4	Negative about writing English	0
Neutral about written f'back	1	Neutral about writing English	1
Positive about verbal f'back	6		
Negative about verbal f'back	0		
Neutral about verbal f'back	1		

### 7.3 Transcript for Sam: Lowest scoring student — Experimental group

#### The meaning of codes

Positive about written f'back	+W	Positive about writing English	+E
Negative about written f'back	XW	Negative about writing English	XE
Neutral about written f'back	(W)	Neutral about writing English	E
Positive about verbal f'back	+V		
Negative about verbal f'back	XV		
Neutral about verbal f'back	(V)		

N.B. The common introduction in which the purpose of the interview was given, and student permissions gained, has not been included in the transcript.

	Exchanges	Comments
<b>Teacher</b>	Sam, how do you feel about writing in English.	
<b>Sam</b>	It is difficult, and a bit boring.	XE
<b>Teacher</b>	What do you feel each time when your essay is returned to you?	
<b>Sam</b>	Um...my feeling? Um ... my feeling is ... I think it is not so good. OK.	XE
<b>Teacher</b>	Can you tell me why?	
<b>Sam</b>	It is because although I can know some of the mistakes from the composition such as some of the grammatical mistakes or the structural mistakes, I still don't know why I get wrong in those mistakes.	XW ~ Needs explanation for mistake, not just identification of it.
<b>Teacher</b>	So what sorts of comments does your teacher often give you about your writing?	
<b>Sam</b>	Just very little. For example, there are some comments on the grammatical mistakes such as the vocabulary or the structural mistakes only. Sometimes there are some comments about the feeling about the composition from the teacher such as some of the logical mistakes.	(W) ~ Finds comments scant. ~ Mostly form focused; some attention to content (organization).
<b>Teacher</b>	How about ... does the teacher usually use the marking code? For example, codes of spelling mistakes which tell you that you have spelling mistakes.	
<b>Sam</b>	Yes. But it is not very clear and I feel confused.	XW ~ Trouble interpreting codes

<b>Teacher</b>	Ok. Why do you feel confused?	
<b>Sam</b>	Because there are so much signposts for each mistake. So sometimes I can't understand and maybe there are so many symbols about each mistake. So it is very unclear.	XW ~ Overwhelmed by the number of codes around a single mistake.
<b>Teacher</b>	Ok. You find it is very confusing because there are many mistakes, all marked with a code.	~ Interviewer tries to determine reason for confusion.
<b>Sam</b>	Yes. Sometimes I don't know what the teachers talking about!	XW ~ Seems not to understand the codes themselves.
<b>Teacher</b>	Ok. So each time when you receive your writing, what is your most important concern? Is it the mark or comment?	
<b>Sam</b>	Mark sure!	(W)
<b>Teacher</b>	Ok. Can you explain why?	
<b>Sam</b>	Because I think it is rather a joke because when you receive your composition, you should be aware of the marks. But also, you should know about what mistakes you have. But it is not enough to let me understand more about what I am wrong or what I am right when writing my essay.	XW ~ Not clear to interviewer why this is a joke. ~ Reiterates lack of understanding about mistakes.
<b>Teacher</b>	So which do you prefer then, written feedback or verbal feedback?	
<b>Sam</b>	I think both of them are useful. But for me, I will rather choose the verbal feedback.	+W +V ~ Both written & verbal feedback are useful.
<b>Teacher</b>	So you say that both are useful or both kinds of feedback are useful. Can you tell me why you think written feedback is useful? In what ways?	
<b>Sam</b>	In the basic ways. Because in the comment, most of the teachers will write about what mistakes you have in the grammatical ways such as structural, sentence structure, grammar etc. So I think it is still useful but not enough.	+W ~ Useful, but not complete.
<b>Teacher</b>	So can you tell me why verbal feedback is a better way of giving you feedback?	
<b>Sam</b>	It is very important because at least I can ask, and there is a chance for me to talk to the teachers. So	+V ~ Focus on interaction &

	at least I can ask, listen and I can learn.	chance for clarification.
<b>Teacher</b>	Why do you think that teacher and student interactions are so important to you?	
<b>Sam</b>	I think there are many reasons about it. But the most important way is that because through the teacher-student conference, the teachers can motivate and encourage me to do English writing in a better way. So I think it is very important.	+V ~ Links interaction with motivation.
<b>Teacher</b>	The teacher can encourage you by showing you how to improve your essay or to give you encouragement?	
<b>Sam</b>	Both. Because in my view, learning English is very important because at least you should learn and make good use of the skills and knowledge when you study English or when you write your composition, so this is the basic way. But if you don't have any motivation or interest in writing English, you will not like or tend to learn these skills. So the motivation and interest are more important or these are the first steps in learning English.	~ Identifies motivation as central to writing/learning English.
<b>Teacher</b>	Motivation? Why do you think that motivation is most important?	
<b>Sam</b>	If you don't want to do that thing, you will not learn about the skills of that thing such as English. If you meet the teacher, the teacher explains more and tell their knowledge or opinions about your composition such as structure, grammar, vocabulary, logical order of your English. You can listen why you will have these mistakes and listen more about the student's response. So you understand, and feel more about the motivation and thought about English from students.	~ Interaction between teacher and student is important as it provides teachers with a better understanding of the needs of the students; the reasons why they made mistakes

End of Transcript



## **Summary**

He thinks that both verbal and written feedback are useful to him. However, he has reservations about written feedback as he is aware of the limitations of teachers providing students with only written feedback. He thinks merely giving him the written feedback with the marking codes may not be of much help to him because he has no chance to ask the teacher questions about his writing and to seek explanations for the mistakes he made. He feels confused with the use of error codes because he does not really understand what each code actually means. He thinks interaction with the teacher and receiving praise from the teacher on a one-to-one basis can help him because the teacher can give him words of encouragement and arouse his interest in learning English.

## **Overall**

- Acknowledges written feedback as useful, but not adequate by itself.
- Strong point of view about not understanding written feedback.
- Positive attitude about verbal feedback is expressed.
- Makes a strong link between interaction with teacher and motivation to learn English.

### **Tally for comments**

Positive about written f'back	2	Positive about writing English	0
Negative about written f'back	5	Negative about writing English	2
Neutral about written f'back	2	Neutral about writing English	0
Positive about verbal f'back	3		
Negative about verbal f'back	0		
Neutral about verbal f'back	0		

## 7.4 Transcript for Alice: Highest scoring student — Control group

### The meaning of codes

Positive about written f'back	+W	Positive about writing English	+E
Negative about written f'back	XW	Negative about writing English	XE
Neutral about written f'back	(W)	Neutral about writing English	E
Positive about verbal f'back	+V		
Negative about verbal f'back	XV		
Neutral about verbal f'back	(V)		

N.B. The common introduction in which the purpose of the interview was given, and student permissions gained, has not been included in the transcript.

	Exchanges	Comments
<b>Teacher</b>	How many years have you been learning English?	~ The interviewer begins with relationship building conversation to put the students at ease.
<b>Alice</b>	About fifteen to sixteen years.	
<b>Teacher</b>	How many languages do you learn at school?	
<b>Alice</b>	I started learning Putonghua when I was in primary 4. I mainly learn English and Chinese throughout all these years.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Which language do you prefer to learn?	
<b>Alice</b>	I like English but I like to listen to westerners and not local people who have local accent.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Which language do you think is more difficult to learn, English or Chinese?	
<b>Alice</b>	English, it is because English is not my mother tongue. Therefore, I feel that English is more difficult to learn.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Is it rewarding for you to learn English?	
<b>Alice</b>	Not really. I don't work hard enough. But I did at a stage put in a lot of effort in learning English and after that I find that it is more relaxing to learn English. When I was in primary 4 and 5, I spent a lot of time revising English. After this time, I am able to cope with the demands of the subject until secondary 5. Now it is much harder.	

<b>Teacher</b>	Do you like reading books?	
<b>Alice</b>	I seldom read English books. I do not like to read books.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you think your English proficiency has improved after having studied in secondary 6 for a few months?	
<b>Alice</b>	My impression towards the Use of English Exam focuses very much on skills. When I refer to the reading materials in the data file, I often encounter vocabulary which are quite difficult and which I have never come across, and the level of difficulty is a lot more than in Form 5 and there is a big gap between these two levels.	
<b>Teacher</b>	If you are asked to read English news articles in the South China Morning Post and Young Post, do you have difficulty in reading them?	
<b>Alice</b>	I won't be able to understand every word in the article, but I should have no problems understanding the articles in general.	
<b>Teacher:</b>	That's quite good. Let's talk about your writing now. How do you feel when you get your writing returned to you?	
<b>Alice</b>	Very surprisingly, I don't usually get high marks and I don't know the reasons why I made mistakes. Some of my classmates are very weak in English but good at other subjects and they have to catch up with their English. I am unlike them, I think I can pass English but I am unable to get high marks. I feel very much at a loss.	~ Perception of poor marks, but highest score in control group. XW ~ Disappointment ~ Feedback = mistakes identified ~ Unaware of underlying reasons for poor performance
<b>Teacher</b>	At a loss? You mean...?	
<b>Alice</b>	Disappointed. Yes, disappointed, and I don't know if I can do better. I think this is just my skill.	XW ~ Reiterates disappointment. ~ Low expectation for improvement.
<b>Teacher</b>	When the essay is returned to you, what kind of responses will be on your work?	
<b>Alice</b>	The teacher will highlight the mistakes. The	(W)

	teacher will inform us of the basic grammatical mistakes and will comment on the content last, for example, telling me to give more of my personal opinion but not in detail.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Feedback is usually error correction, but with some attention to content.</li> <li>~ 'Last': significant in student's perception of teacher's priority</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	How does your teacher show you your mistakes?	
<b>Alice</b>	Mostly they are underlined or marked. There are marks which mean your spelling is wrong, or the punctuation is wrong. Something like that. Or a circle on the word.	(W) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Emphasis on error identification.</li> </ul> (W) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Correction codes are used but not helping the student to correct every mistake.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	Does your teacher show you on the paper how to correct your mistakes?	
<b>Alice</b>	Sometimes.	(W)
<b>Teacher</b>	What kind of response would you like to get from your teacher that you think would be really useful to you?	
<b>Alice</b>	The best response should be to pinpoint my individual problems. Since the beginning of the academic year, about five to six essays have already been written. The teacher should pinpoint weaknesses of individual students. Some students may be weak in grammar and some in vocabulary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ The meaning is not clear as written feedback on papers is individually based, but this was not followed up, to avoid an appearance of being defensive which would put the students on her guard.</li> <li>~ Student identifies form, not content, as the focus for feedback &amp; the focus of individuals' needs.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you like to have direct verbal feedback from the teacher?	
<b>Alice</b>	I think it is good to have direct verbal feedback from the teacher because it is difficult to solve individual problems in class because students are of mixed ability.	+V <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Verbal feedback allows teachers to cater for mixed abilities.</li> <li>~ Individual attention is clearly an issue for this student.</li> </ul>

<b>Teacher</b>	What changes do you make to your paper after you get your feedback?	
<b>Alice</b>	I go over the essay and if I don't know how to do the corrections, I will just leave it and will not seek help from the teacher.	XW ~ Written comment inadequate for doing all corrections. ~ No other strategies for getting assistance.
<b>Teacher</b>	Does the teacher comment on your organization, fluency, connection, coherence and make you do corrections on those?	
<b>Alice</b>	No, the teacher will mainly focus on the grammatical mistakes.	~ Feedback = identification of grammar mistakes
<b>Teacher</b>	Does the comment of the teacher help you to make improvement in terms of your writing ability?	
<b>Alice</b>	I will remember after reading the written feedback of the teacher.	+W
<b>Teacher</b>	You said earlier that you hadn't made much progress. I wonder why, if the feedback helps you remember your mistakes?	
<b>Alice</b>	This has something to do with the fact that we do not write often enough. First of all, I do not take the initiative to do writing on my own. There is the lack of sufficient practice. The second reason is by the time I do my next piece of writing it is already quite a while after the written comments were given to me. I have a concept which I have acquired before studying secondary 5 and will easily forget the advice of the teacher when I am told to do writing after a period of time.	~ Seems to be relying on past learning, not new learning. ~ Forgets written comments after a while, which contradicts earlier statement that she remembers from written comments.
<b>Teacher</b>	How often do you approach your teacher to ask for explanations about your mistakes?	
<b>Alice</b>	I will ask my teacher whenever I have problems I don't understand in my writing.	~ Example of a high proficiency student being willing to approach the teacher for help. ~ This contradicts her earlier claim that she would not ask the teacher.
<b>Teacher</b>	Can you give suggestions to teachers to help students perform better in writing?	

<b>Alice</b>	The teacher should try to mark in greater detail. I understand that teachers have lots of paper to mark but they should try to focus on the weaknesses of individual students.	+ W ~ Expects more written feedback to be even more effective. ~ She returns to the theme of individualising teaching and feedback.
<b>Teacher</b>	Apart from providing written feedback, do you think that individual verbal feedback is beneficial to you?	
<b>Alice</b>	Of course, this should be better because I can ask the teacher for explanation if I do not know how to correct the mistakes in my writing. The teacher may also have a better understanding of my weaknesses and help me more to improve my writing, and arouse my interest in learning English.	+V ~ Acknowledges the possibility of asking for help in verbal interaction. ~ Perceived inappropriacy of demanding more individual attention from teacher
<b>Teacher</b>	How does this arouse your interest in learning English?	
<b>Alice</b>	I think I can enjoy a great sense of success; this will help to build up my confidence in learning English. Also, the support from my teacher is very important because I need the encouragement from the teacher to make me keep on trying to do well in writing good English	+E ~ Positive about the role of writing in her English learning/use. ~ Needs encouragement.

End of Transcript

## Summary

Alice associates feedback on writing with attention to form rather than content. She expresses a strong interest in individual attention for herself and peers, and again this individualisation is expressed in terms of specific form-related problems with writing. She does not follow up the lead about items of writing relating to content and organisational areas of writing with any expression of a desire for feedback on these

aspects of writing. In fact, her suggestion for improved feedback is to get more of the same; this is in spite of some stated drawbacks with written feedback:

- She doesn't understand the problems behind her poor writing performances.
- Written feedback does not always help her with corrections.
- She forgets the written comments after a time.
- She is discouraged & disappointed by her feedback.

When directly asked, she is supportive of the notion of verbal feedback, for two reasons:

- She can ask for explanations, which she is not able to get from written feedback.
- She recognizes this format as a tool for giving and receiving individual attention.

### **Overall**

- Endorses written feedback, in spite of some of the identified shortcomings.
- Positive attitude about verbal feedback is expressed.
- Improvement in writing ability can enhance this students' interest in learning English.



### **Tally for comments**

Positive about written f'back	2	Positive about writing English	1
Negative about written f'back	3	Negative about writing English	0
Neutral about written f'back	4	Neutral about writing English	0
Positive about verbal f'back	2		
Negative about verbal f'back	0		
Neutral about verbal f'back	0		

## 7.5 Transcript for Ricky: Mean scoring student — Control group

### The meaning of codes

Positive about written f'back	+W	Positive about writing English	+E
Negative about written f'back	XW	Negative about writing English	XE
Neutral about written f'back	(W)	Neutral about writing English	E
Positive about verbal f'back	+V		
Negative about verbal f'back	XV		
Neutral about verbal f'back	(V)		

N.B. The common introduction in which the purpose of the interview was given, and student permissions gained, has not been included in the transcript.

	Exchanges	Comments
<b>Teacher</b>	How many years have you been studying English in this school?	~ The interviewer begins with relationship building conversation to put the students at ease.
<b>Ricky</b>	About six months.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Which banding of school did you attend before joining this school, Ricky?	
<b>Ricky</b>	Band 1.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Which subject do you like most in school?	
<b>Ricky</b>	Even though I have learned English for so many years and I still have problems with grammar. I find that I still like learning English.	~ Emphasis on grammar as a source of problem with the language (because of a teaching emphasis on grammar? – outside the scope of the research, so not explored)
<b>Teacher</b>	How many languages do you study in school?	
<b>Ricky</b>	English and Chinese.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Which is the language you find most difficult to learn?	
<b>Ricky</b>	English.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Since you like English, why is your written English not good?	
<b>Ricky</b>	I did not do revision and learn from my mistakes.	~ Focus on error correction

		as an important part of language learning. ~ Inadequacy of written feedback, to improve this students writing over time.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you like reading English books?	
<b>Ricky</b>	I do not like reading both English and Chinese books.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Let's talk about your English writing. Do you like writing in English?	
<b>Ricky</b>	Not much. I don't do well so I don't like it.	XE
<b>Teacher</b>	So, how about each time when your teacher returns your essay to you, how do you feel?	
<b>Ricky</b>	Sometimes I will feel disappointed.	XW ~ Disappointment ~ Feedback = mistakes identified ~ Unaware of underlying reasons for poor performance
<b>Teacher</b>	Why do you feel disappointed?	
<b>Ricky</b>	It is because when I receive my essay, I will wonder why the mark is so low or why the writing has so many mistakes. I don't understand why the teacher underlined so many of my mistakes. When each piece of writing is returned to me even with writing which I thought I had done pretty well, the same kind of feedback was given to me — underlining the mistakes in my writing — red all over.	XW ~ Disappointment with result; poor result without really understanding why
<b>Teacher</b>	So, your teacher often gives you some written feedback for your writing. Do you think it is useful?	
<b>Ricky</b>	I think it is useful but not enough.	+W ~ Focus on mistakes: error correction in feedback
<b>Teacher</b>	Useful in what sense?	
<b>Ricky</b>	Although some feedback is quite short indeed, some is quite clear by pointing out what problems I had in my essay, but the feedback is not detailed enough as they will only point out the main	+W ~ Feedback useful for pointing out problems in the essay.

	problems in the essay and will not guide you to correct the problems.	
<b>Teacher</b>	When you get your writing back from your teacher, are there things you would like to get from the teacher?	
<b>Ricky</b>	Apart from learning grammar, I would like to know if there are better ways of expressing ideas in the writing that was returned to me, for example, how to write concisely or beautifully?	<p>XW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ A learning need not currently being met.</li> <li>~ A request for attention to more than grammar. This is still form, but is more than just accuracy.</li> <li>~ Also implied desire to learn grammar, but not grammar alone.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	Are marks important to you?	
<b>Ricky</b>	They do. If I make many grammatical mistakes my marks will naturally be low and it is a major concern to me.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Focus on marks rather than writing per se.</li> <li>~ Link between grammar and writing marks.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	Will your teacher help you to rewrite certain sentences?	
<b>Ricky</b>	Depending on the type of mistakes made.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Give me an example of something the teacher would help you rewrite.	
<b>Ricky</b>	Maybe if I get the tense wrong, or if I put words in the wrong order.	<p>(W)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Current focus on error correction/grammar.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	How would you expect the writing to be marked?	
<b>Ricky</b>	Focus more on content and provide guidance as to how to develop the content of the piece of writing.	<p>XW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Implied inadequacy in kind of written feedback</li> <li>~ Wants attention to content not just form.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	If you have a chance to talk to the teacher what would you like to suggest to your teacher to help her understand how you expect the piece of writing to be marked.	
<b>Ricky</b>	I would like to tell the teacher that it is alright to underline the grammatical mistakes but detailed explanation is expected. I also want my teacher to	<p>+W</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Happy with underlining as a form of written feedback</li> </ul>

	tell me how to improve on the content of my writing. If the content of the piece of writing is irrelevant to the topic, I want the teacher to suggest to me how to correct my essay so as to make it relevant to the topic I was asked to write on.	<p>XW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Inadequacy of written feedback alone.</li> </ul> <p>+V</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Need for explanations, verbal as he only wants underlining on the paper.</li> <li>~ Wants focus on content as well as form.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	Perhaps you can talk to your school teacher about your needs?	
<b>Ricky</b>	But many (said his name in plural) prefer the teachers to help them with grammar (an attitude of helplessness is shown).	<p>XW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Accepts his needs may not be met.</li> <li>~ Seems to be sacrificing his needs to the assumed needs of other students to get feedback on grammar.</li> <li>~ Identifies grammar as central to English learning.</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	What changes do you make to your writing after it is returned to you?	
<b>Ricky</b>	I will just correct the mistakes underlined and usually leave the content alone. I will then ask my classmates for help if I don't know how to correct the mistakes I've made.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Focus solely on error correction/no content</li> <li>~ Can't independently correct based on feedback</li> <li>~ Access peers rather than teacher for assistance</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	Why don't you ask your teacher?	
<b>Ricky</b>	Well, maybe students can teach each other or learn from each other. Because teachers are often very busy and it will be impossible for them to cater for the needs of so many students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Peer support</li> <li>~ Perceived inappropriacy of demanding more from teacher</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	If your classmates cannot help you with your correction, what would you do?	
<b>Ricky</b>	There is no problem because the classmate sitting next to me is very good at English. He doesn't refer to the dictionary all the time. He thinks it is a waste of time. You seldom ask your teacher how to do your corrections or unless you are pushed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>~ Peer support</li> <li>~ Teacher is last resort for help</li> </ul>
<b>Teacher</b>	In the recent six months, how many times have you	

	asked your English teacher?	
<b>Ricky</b>	A few times.	
<b>Teacher</b>	What would make the feedback on your writing more effective for you?	
<b>Ricky</b>	For grammar, simply underline the mistakes. I also want my teacher to tell me how to improve on the content of my writing. If the content of the piece of writing is irrelevant to the topic, I want the teacher to suggest to me how to correct my essay so as to make it relevant to the topic I was asked to write on. When the teacher talks to me I will understand how to do it.	+W ~ Implies he wants continued written feedback; No codes, no explanations – just underlining. XW ~ But it's not enough. +V ~ Verbal input assists understanding in relation to content.
<b>Teacher</b>	When you are able to improve your writing ability, do you think you will have more interest in learning English?	
<b>Ricky</b>	That's for sure. If I can write English, I will be able to speak the language. Then I can use English to communicate with foreigners and I'll do more with the English language. After all English is so vital in Hong Kong.	~ Links writing and speaking ~ Expressing communicative goal in language learning, which is hinted at above in references to content +E ~ Positive about the role of writing in his English learning/use.
<b>Teacher</b>	If you have the chance to choose, would you prefer written feedback or individual verbal explaining?	
<b>Ricky</b>	I think both are very important. Written feedback can give an instant effect, but verbal feedback is something like a bonus. When I want to further learn from my mistakes, I can ask my teacher for further information. I'd prefer one-to-one guidance because I can have interaction with the teacher and the teachers can help me with the problems that I have with my writing.	+W ~ Instant feedback +V ~ the student's preference for verbal feedback because it provides the opportunity for teacher-student interaction & understanding of mistakes.

<b>Teacher</b>	So the interaction can help you?	
	Yes, and I think verbal feedback can help improve the structure of my essay. This is difficult in writing comments. And I will know my teacher cares for me.	+V ~ Identifies more positives: ~ Verbal feedback for structural help ~ Evidence of teacher care
<b>Teacher</b>	Thanks very much for answering my questions.	

End of Transcript

## Summary

He thinks purely providing written feedback is inadequate to meet his needs because if the teacher just underlines his mistakes, he may not know of the reasons why he made mistakes, and he would like an explanation about the mistakes. This is a clear request for extended explanations. However, he considers it difficult or unrealistic to get individual help from the teacher because the teacher has to attend to so many students and does not have time to give individual attention to students. Later the student seems to suggest that it is fine for the teacher to underline his grammatical mistakes but he would like the teacher to discuss with him what he can do to improve the content of his writing. He would like the writing teacher to teach him how to improve the content of his writing and tell him what he can do to make the content relevant to the topic and to write more expressively. Either way, there appears to be a need for this student to interact with the teacher about his work, not just to rely on basic error correction.

In the absence of feedback on content, his rewriting focuses purely on error correction, and only on those errors that are identified by the teacher. He relies heavily on a classmate for assistance in making these corrections. It is interesting to wonder if his

request for simply underlining errors on the writing might change if he were seated beside a less obliging and less competent classmate.

### **Overall**

- Preference for verbal feedback is expressed.
- Improvement in writing ability can enhance this students' interest in learning English.
- Skeptical about possibility of getting individual attention.

### **Tally for comments**

Positive about written f'back	5	Positive about writing English	1
Negative about written f'back	7	Negative about writing English	1
Neutral about written f'back	1	Neutral about writing English	0
Positive about verbal f'back	4		
Negative about verbal f'back	0		
Neutral about verbal f'back	0		



## 7.6 Transcript for Betty: Lowest scoring student — Control group

### The meaning of codes

Positive about written f'back	+W	Positive about writing English	+E
Negative about written f'back	XW	Negative about writing English	XE
Neutral about written f'back	(W)	Neutral about writing English	E
Positive about verbal f'back	+V		
Negative about verbal f'back	XV		
Neutral about verbal f'back	(V)		

N.B. The common introduction in which the purpose of the interview was given, and student permissions gained, has not been included in the transcript.

	Exchanges	Comments
<b>Teacher</b>	Betty, first of all, I would like to know how long have you been learning English?	
<b>Betty</b>	Except pre-school education, it should be 13 years, started from primary school.	
<b>Teacher</b>	So ... you have learned English for quite a number of years, right?	
<b>Betty</b>	Yes.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Now, what do you think of your language ability? Are you good at the language?	
<b>Betty</b>	I think I am not good at speaking English, because ... I think English is not an easy language to learn. I have to remember a lot of rules such as the use of tenses and preposition. Apart from this, many words have different meanings at different times. I really find this very difficult to follow. Therefore I always misunderstand or have no ideas about what a passage want to tell us.	
<b>Teacher</b>	I think lots of people have the same problems when they learn English. So let's talk about the skills when you learn English. Which is most difficult for you?	
<b>Betty</b>	For example, how to do the opening and how to end an essay, topic sentence, elaboration?	
<b>Teacher</b>	Actually, there are four skills. Have you ever heard of the four skills? Reading? Speaking?	

<b>Betty</b>	Ooh ... reading, speaking listening and writing. Which is most difficult? I think is speaking.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Speaking?	
<b>Betty</b>	Yes. Because when I speak English, I have a very short time to think what I am going to talk. But when an essay I can organise the passage in a longer time.	
<b>Teacher</b>	So do you think there is any connection between writing and speaking?	
<b>Betty</b>	Yes, of course. I think if I write well, then I speak well.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Why do you think so?	
<b>Betty</b>	Writing just like speaking, because the organization is the same and the sentence forming is also the same.	
<b>Teacher</b>	That is the sentence structure is very similar.	
<b>Betty</b>	Yes.	
<b>Teacher</b>	So if you are good at writing, then you can think of good sentences for you to communicate. Right? How do you find writing?	
<b>Betty</b>	If I have to write an essay in Chinese, I will have no problem. But every time I write English essay, I can't do the essay as good as Chinese essay. Because I have difficulties in forming a sentence logically. Therefore when I want to say something, but I don't know how to express this in English fluently. So I talk about the other things. That's why my essay lacks coherency.	XE ~ Very articulate about difficulties.
<b>Teacher</b>	Tell me about the teaching of English writing in your schools.	
<b>Betty</b>	I think it lacks of response to students individually. I think this is very important. Because every student's ability is different. Some students may show improvement in a shorter time, while the others may need longer time on improving their writing. I remember that when I was in Form 4 and 5, some of my classmates' English were quite good and the teacher paid more attention to these students. The students with poor English were neglected. As a result, those students' English got better, but my English showed improvement very	+V ~ Highlights importance of individual attention. ~ Links high personal attention to improvement. ~ Implicit support for verbal feedback.

	slowly.	
<b>Teacher</b>	When you try to recall the things back, when you in the secondary, from Form 1 to Form 5, how did your teacher teach you writing? What did they ask you to do? For example, when you were given a topic, what did the teachers tell you to do?	
<b>Betty</b>	Sometimes they asked us to write a story ... I just make use of what Chinese teacher teach us the method of writing a well-organised essay, but in English, I can't do this very well.	~ Hints at the second language focus on writing as a means of learning language not writing per se – but this is not a focus and so is not pursued.
<b>Teacher</b>	How do you feel when you are asked to do a piece of writing for the teachers?	
<b>Betty</b>	Actually, no special feeling, because I just treat as a job that I must do. Of course, I will do that seriously, otherwise, I can't get improved.	E ~ Approach to writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about when your teacher returns your essay to you? How would you feel each time when you receive your work back?	
<b>Betty</b>	No special feeling too, but I'm very care about the mark, because I think higher mark means my English is better.	
<b>Teacher</b>	How about the comments given back from the teacher? What kind of comments do you receive?	
<b>Betty</b>	Written feedback which mainly tells me about my mistakes and weakness.	(W)
<b>Teacher</b>	And is this helpful for you.	
<b>Betty</b>	Sometimes. Sometimes I don't understand the teacher.	+W XW ~ Useful, but not always.
<b>Teacher</b>	What do you do if you don't understand?	
<b>Betty</b>	I would try to ask the teacher, but I found that this is not very useful because there are too many classmates in a class. So that the teacher can't explain my mistakes very clearly.	~ Unclear if she means the explanations are not clear, or the teacher has no time.
<b>Teacher</b>	You mean you don't understand when the teacher tells you?	~ Attempt to clarify
<b>Betty</b>	She doesn't have time to tell me.	

<b>Teacher</b>	Which do you think is more useful to you? Written feedback or verbal feedback?	
<b>Betty</b>	Verbal feedback is better.	+V
<b>Teacher</b>	Why do you think verbal feedback is better than written feedback?	
<b>Betty</b>	Verbal feedback can give us more explanation of our mistakes. This cannot be done by written feedback. It is difficult to write in some sentences. Verbal feedback can tell us more. It is easier to understand. Then we will be more interested in learning English.	+V ~ Outlines benefits, including greater motivation
<b>Teacher</b>	So you think your teacher can give you help when you talk? Can your teacher help with written comments?	
<b>Betty</b>	When we talk I will ask her many questions about writing.	+V ~ Focus on interactive benefit
<b>Teacher</b>	About writing? For example?	
<b>Betty</b>	For example the use of tenses, because I always make mistakes of about using the wrong tenses.	+V ~ Possibility to clarify ongoing problems
<b>Teacher</b>	How about when the teacher asks you to go home to do your corrections without explaining your mistakes to you, how are you going to do that?	
<b>Betty</b>	I think it is very hard to do because I don't understand why I was wrong. Maybe I will ask my classmates for help.	XW ~ Written feedback lacks explanations
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you think your classmates can help you with the problems?	
<b>Betty</b>	Sometimes, we discuss our problems in groups and explain others' mistakes.	~ Peer support
<b>Teacher</b>	Do they help you most of the time or only sometimes?	
<b>Betty</b>	Sometimes.	~ Random peer support
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you think that improvement in writing ability can better enhance your interest in learning English?	
<b>Betty</b>	I think this can certainly help to build up my confidence in learning English. If I can get good	~ Motivation to learn is related to student

	marks in my writing, I will be interested to read more and will be more willing to turn to my teacher for help if I have any problems with my writing.	performance in writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you have any questions you would like to ask?	
<b>Betty</b>	No.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Thank you very much for spending your time for the interview.	

End of Transcript

## Summary

Betty considers marks an indication of the improvement in her language proficiency. She thinks that written feedback fails to provide her with the help for her to do corrections. Turning to her peers for help is considered as one of the alternatives to solve her problem, although this is sporadic. She has a desire to make improvement in writing as this will help to build up her confidence and motivate her to put more effort in learning English. She is always ready to turn to her teacher for help with her writing if necessary.

## Overall

- Written feedback lacks the detailed explanation she needs.
- Demonstrates a desire for individual attention from teacher.
- Positive attitude about verbal feedback is expressed.
- Links interactive teacher input to improved writing ability and motivate her to learn English.

### **Tally for comments**

Positive about written f'back	1	Positive about writing English	0
Negative about written f'back	2	Negative about writing English	1
Neutral about written f'back	1	Neutral about writing English	0
Positive about verbal f'back	5		
Negative about verbal f'back	0		
Neutral about verbal f'back	0		

## **Addendum 8**

### **8. WRITING TOPICS FOR FOLLOW-UP TEACHER-STUDENT CONFERENCING**

#### **8.1 Writing topic for follow up group writing Task 1**

You are a school prefect. You have to be on duty during recess and lunch-time three times a week. Recently you have witnessed some students breaking the school rules. Write a letter to the school principal describing the seriousness of the problems and suggesting ways to solve these problems.

#### **8.2 Writing topic for follow up group writing Task 2**

Imagine you are a young teacher. Write a letter to your friend, Chris, in Australia, describing at least three disturbing things which happened during your lesson and how you are going to prevent such problems from happening in your lessons again. Describe your feelings during the lesson.

## Addendum 9

### 9. SAMPLE ESSAYS FROM FOLLOW-UP GROUP WRITING TASKS

#### 9.1 Sample from Task 1

Dear principal,

I am one of the school prefects. I have to be on duty during recess and lunch time three times a week. Recently, I have witnessed some students breaking the school rules.

During the recess, I noticed that some students enter other classrooms in order to chat with their friends and play some games for relaxing. However, it is very disturbing when many others are trying to work. In addition, I discovered that some of them may bring forbidden things to school, such as magazines, comics, mobile phones and so on. These things will affect their learning performance. And the school rules do not allow them to do so.

Sometimes after the recess bell rings, some students still walking around in the classroom and keep talking, their behaviour makes very noisy to others. Besides, they may run in the corridor which is easily lead to accidents take place.

In order to solve the above problems, I suggest that students must be follow prefects' instruction. When prefects notice that some of them are breaking the school rules, they should allow collect student card, report to teachers and give them a penalty. School should enforce the rules strictly. Also teachers need to consider how the penalty might be reformed to prevent students breaking the school rules again. I remember that one day's lunch time, there were bullying happened. One of the students was playing tricks by others, also made his desk very dirty and laugh at him. Also, students are sometimes fighting since argue with each other. On the other side, after students have lunch, they will make the classroom smelly because of not probably handle the litters. It is not suitable environment for learning.

To tackle these problem, school should hold some lecture course to teach them get along with classmates. And they should have responsibility for ensuring that environment is favorable.

I hope these suggestions can improve quality of school life and problems can be resolved as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely  
Flora



## 9.2 Sample from Task 2

Dear Chris,

How are you? I am writing this letter to you because I want to describe three disturbing things which happened during my lesson and how I'm going to prevent such problems from happening in my lessons again. I want that you can give me some suggestion for these things.

Firstly, let me talk you what happen during my lesson now. One day, I found that some students are asleep during my lesson. Of course, I don't want it. So I at once slapped their desk in order to let them get up. Although they didn't sleep again, they didn't like me, I feel very terrible by this thing. Now, I don't know what can I do.

Addition that, sometimes the students are lost of control. They talked loudly. A lot of students cannot listen my sound. It is very affective for different student. But they seem not to know that. They were also talking. I tried many ways to stop this situation. For example, staying after school and calling their parent. But there is not success. However, I want my students to learn somethings and maintain the law of class. Do you have some idea to you as so to solve this problem.

Finally, I also have one problem. As you know, nowaday, the teacher usually have much many works to do. For example for me, I am not only work in school, but also study in night. It is very difficult to balance my life. Now, I never have own time to do somethings which I want. I feel very hard. So I hope you can talk me what can I do.

Your sincerely,  
Candy

# Appendix 10

## 10. TRANSCRIPTIONS OF FOLLOW-UP GROUP INTERVIEWS

### 10.1 Interview 1

#### The meaning of codes

Positive about written f'back	+W	Positive about writing English	+E
Negative about written f'back	XW	Negative about writing English	XE
Neutral about written f'back	(W)	Neutral about writing English	E
Positive about verbal f'back	+V		
Negative about verbal f'back	XV		
Neutral about verbal f'back	(V)		

N.B. The common introduction in which the purpose of the interview was given, and student permissions gained, has not been included in the transcript.

	Exchanges	Comments
<b>Teacher</b>	How do you usually feel after receiving your writing from the teacher?	
<b>Candy</b>	I did not want to read back my writing because there are often many mistakes and I find it unacceptable to make mistakes I should not have made.	XE ~ Unwilling to read back her writing; the negativity seems to be directed towards herself; not meeting her own expectations.
<b>Teacher</b>	How do you feel when you get praise?	
<b>Candy</b>	I have never thought of receiving praise from the teacher. The amount of correction is often more than the work done by me.	XW ~ No confidence in herself, based on the corrections: length of writing ratio; no expectation of praise; a caution for teachers about the impact of the sheer number of corrections for some students.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you, Flora? How do you feel when you get feedback?	
<b>Flora</b>	I agree with Candy because there are many red marks in the writing after being corrected. I often make spelling mistakes I should not have made and there are also	XW ~ Work heavily marked, many spelling and grammatical mistakes in her work; again, negativity is

	many grammatical mistakes.	directed towards self.
<b>Teacher</b>	Does this affect your confidence in learning English?	
<b>Flora</b>	Yes, at that moment. But after a few days, I often feel fine.	XW ~ Affects confidence, albeit temporarily; question: long term impact of repeated episodes of feeling low confidence.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you Candy? How do you feel when you get feedback?	
<b>Candy</b>	I don't want to do any more writing because I need to write so many words for a piece of writing and I don't think I have the ability to do so.	XE ~ Low confidence for writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	What's your reaction when you're asked to write?	
<b>Candy</b>	Actually I feel a bit scared. I do not want to do any writing.	XE ~ No confidence for writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you Tom? How do you feel when you get feedback?	
<b>Tom</b>	When I was asked to write about 200 words for the certificate level, I could cope but now I have to write 500 words, I can only write 400 words. I have no confidence I can write 500 words.	~ Tom reacts to Cindy's previous question rather than that asked. However, length of writing tasks is clearly an issue for this student.
<b>Teacher</b>	How would you describe your feeling when you receive your writing feedback from your teacher?	~ Interviewer restates question.
<b>Tom</b>	I feel fine.	+W ~ Tom seems to be quite confident, at least untroubled with his work
<b>Teacher</b>	Great. That sounds like you feel confident about writing.	
<b>Students</b>	(Laughter ...)	~ Showing acknowledgment
<b>Teacher</b>	What type of feedback, written or verbal, do you usually receive from your teacher?	
<b>Flora</b>	Actually, the teacher will usually ask you if you have any question. Unless they ask, the teacher will not take the initiative in explaining problematic points to the	~ Neutral comment; teacher assumes students' understanding unless they speak out

	students.	
<b>Flora</b>	The teacher usually underlines mistakes, for example, using the code 'v' to indicate the use of wrong verbs.	(W) ~ Explaining how writing is marked.
<b>Tom</b>	The teacher types out the common errors of students and asks students in the class to correct the errors.	(W) ~ Explaining how writing is marked.
<b>Teacher</b>	Does your teacher always ask students to do corrections together?	
<b>Candy</b>	My teacher will extract common grammatical errors from students' writing as a whole and a model essay will be provided for the students afterwards.	(W) ~ Explaining error correction practices.
<b>Teacher</b>	Does the feedback you get help you with your writing?	
<b>Flora</b>	After receiving the teacher feedback I find that the essay reads more fluently. I understand the feedback of the teacher.	+W ~ Explaining how the marking of teacher can help to improve her writing.
<b>Tom</b>	Generally speaking, I understand.	+W ~ Expressing understanding of the teacher's written feedback.
<b>Teacher</b>	So the feedback from the teacher helps you?	
<b>Flora</b>	It depends whether students are eager to go over the mistakes they made in the writing and to learn from their mistakes.	(W) ~ Identifies students attitude as significant in feedback process.
<b>Teacher</b>	When the teacher proofreads to correct the mistakes in your writing, does that help you?	
<b>Tom</b>	Mostly I think it is not bad, but sometimes, the teacher only underlines the mistakes I made in the writing and I do not understand the reason why.	+W ~ Feedback is helpful XW ~ Inadequacy of process is identified: just underlining the mistakes without explanation.
<b>Teacher</b>	(Indicating Candy and Flora) Do you actually know how to do your corrections? Do you understand what to do?	
<b>Flora</b>	The teacher simply asks us to copy the	(W)

	corrected essay once.	
<b>Candy</b>	When I am asked to do the corrections, I usually just copy the corrections made by the teacher.	(W)
<b>Teacher</b>	You just copy? No thinking, just copying?	
<b>Candy</b>	Yes, I think so. Even though I copy the corrected essay once, I still continue to make similar mistakes in the next piece of writing.	XW ~ Student's comment indicates that little learning follows the feedback and correction process.
<b>Teacher</b>	Flora, what do you do about corrections?	
<b>Flora</b>	I copy too.	(W)
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you, Tom? What do you do about corrections?	
<b>Tom</b>	I do the same. I simply follow the corrections of the teacher.	(W)
<b>Teacher</b>	What do you learn from doing the corrections?	
<b>Candy</b>	I think if we copy the essay once, we will have a deeper impression and this is better than not doing anything.	+W ~ Copying the essay once can help reinforce memory; contradicts her earlier comment that she keeps making the same mistakes.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you still do re-correction after doing the first corrections?	
<b>Tom</b>	Yes.	(W)
<b>Teacher</b>	Just now you said that the teacher talks about and corrects the common errors made by the class. What do you do if you have a mistake that has not been discussed and you are required to do corrections?	
<b>Flora</b>	This will not happen to me because the teacher usually helps me correct all the mistakes. The only problem is that students are not careful enough in copying teacher's correction and misspell the words.	+W ~ This student seems to imply that the teacher has fulfilled his/her responsibility in helping students to correct their mistakes, but the reason for students' failure to benefit from the teacher feedback seems to arise from their carelessness in copying teacher's

		correction and overlooking spelling mistakes.
<b>Candy</b>	The teacher will make us do re-correction by copying the wrong sentence in the correction one more time.	(W) ~ Explaining how to do re-correction.
<b>Tom</b>	Sometimes I do not know the reasons why I made mistakes in my writing, so there is still the chance for me making mistakes in my corrections.	XW ~ Student seems to know the problem with the use of written feedback: the student fails to benefit from the written feedback because of the lack of explanation in teacher's written feedback.
<b>Teacher</b>	Does your teacher talk to you, one-to-one, about your writing?	
<b>Candy</b>	We hardly have the chance to receive individual teacher feedback because teachers prefer to help students correct all their mistakes in their writing rather than providing them with individual feedback. Most of the students just simply copy the corrected essay once. The teacher will not spend time discussing with the students the mistakes they made in the writing.	XW ~ The student acknowledges the fact that written feedback from teacher is inadequate to meet the needs of individual needs and is doubtful of the usefulness of students merely asked to copy the corrected essay once. In other words, the student seems to suggest that more interaction of the students with the teacher on a one-to-one basis is needed.
<b>Flora</b>	My situation is more or less like Candy. Students are expected to take the initiative in asking teachers if they have questions about their piece of writing. It is because there are many students in one class and it is almost impossible for teachers to give attention to individual students.	XW ~ This student identifies the inadequacy of just providing students with written feedback to students, that is, students are expected to take the initiative in asking questions in view of the number of students the teacher has to attend to.
<b>Tom</b>	If students do not take the initiative in asking questions, the teacher will not teach students individually.	XW ~ This student seems to suggest that teachers should take a more active role in responding to the individual problems of students with their writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	Would it help if the teacher provided you with feedback on a one-to-one basis?	

<b>Tom</b>	If I have time, it is good for teachers to provide me with feedback on a one-to-one basis. In reality, teachers may find it difficult to spend time on every student.	+V ~ The student acknowledges the benefit of receiving individual attention from the teacher but does not think this will happen in view of the number of students the teacher has to attend to.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you want teachers to provide you with feedback on a one to one basis?	
<b>Tom</b>	Yes, I would like to.	+V ~ Likes the idea of receiving individual attention from the teacher.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you, Flora? Do you want teachers to provide you with feedback on a one to one basis?	
<b>Flora</b>	Yes.	+V ~ Seems positive about the possibility of receiving feedback from the teacher on a one-to-one basis.
<b>Teacher</b>	Candy, do you want teachers to provide you with feedback on a one to one basis?	
<b>Candy</b>	It's good because students can have a clearer understanding of the mistakes they made in their writing. Students can ask the teacher questions and the teacher can immediately respond to the questions raised. Students may easily forget the written comments of the teachers and they will put aside their essay.	+V ~ This student seems to suggest that written feedback is not as helpful as the verbal feedback in view of the interactive nature of verbal feedback.
<b>Teacher</b>	If teachers in Hong Kong give individual feedback to students, how will students benefit?	
<b>Flora</b>	After the teacher explains, students tend to remember better.	+V ~ Advantage of verbal feedback is highlighted – students can remember better.
<b>Candy</b>	Apart from pointing out the problems in the piece of writing being discussed, the teacher may even point out students' individual problems in writing.	+V ~ The benefits of verbal feedback are highlighted - more attention to students' individual problems.

<b>Tom</b>	Students can remember the reasons for the corrections.	+V ~ The advantage of verbal feedback is highlighted : can help students remember the reasons why they made mistakes.
<b>Teacher</b>	How did the verbal feedback provided for you just now help you with your writing?	
<b>Candy</b>	Before starting to write I need to think of the ideas for each paragraph I want to write but not write down anything I can think of. Otherwise the ideas can be very confusing in the essay, for example, jumping one point to the next point. No one tell me before.	+V ~ Explaining how verbal feedback has helped her – organize her ideas before putting them on paper.
<b>Teacher</b>	The conference helped you with this?	~ The previous response identified a problem, but did not directly say that the conference helped. The interviewer pursues further.
<b>Candy</b>	In the essay I have just written, I should have mentioned all the problems and then given suggestions to solve the problems. But when I have finished mentioning the solutions to the problems, I realised that I did not have enough ideas for the solution, so I simply jumped back to mention one more problem. We talked about this in the conference. It helped me.	+V ~ She explains how verbal feedback has helped her – she realised that she should organise her ideas well before she started to write.
<b>Teacher</b>	I hope this helps you with the Advanced Level Use of English Examination. How about you, Flora? What did you think about the conference?	
<b>Flora</b>	I realise that I need to be careful in understanding the topic and to find out what ideas should be included under this topic.	(V) ~ Identifies what was learned in the conference.
<b>Teacher</b>	You talked about this in the conference.	
<b>Flora</b>	There is the need for the writer to understand the situation, but I just ignored the situation and just wrote according to what I thought should be included in the essay. I just wrote according to what I wanted without understanding the	+V ~ Explains how she has benefited from the verbal feedback she has received from the teacher.



	situation. I understand now. I can do better.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Did the conference help?	~ The interviewer is still trying to get this student to state a connection between this writing issue and the conference. So far it is only implied.
<b>Flora</b>	Yes. I have to think about why I'm writing and who will read it.	(V) ~ Identifies what was learned in the conference.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you, Tom? Can you tell me how the verbal feedback provided for you just now helped with the content of your writing?	
<b>Tom</b>	I mentioned only two points in my essay. I couldn't think of the third point and due to the shortage of time, I could only write two points. This is good for me to know. I didn't know with written mark.	+V, XW ~ He mentions how he has benefited from the conference; he should have included three points in his essay instead of just two.
<b>Teacher</b>	So does verbal feedback help you with this?	
<b>Tom</b>	It can help me to think of what ideas I should include in my essay. Sometimes I think of ideas which are irrelevant to the topic and some ideas are even unreasonable and illogical that should not be included in the essay.	(V) ~ Identifies what was learned in the conference.
<b>Teacher</b>	That's good to remember for the Advanced Level English exam. Can you tell me how the verbal feedback provided for you just now can help you with the language for your writing?	
<b>Candy</b>	I realise I have to be careful with the use of adjectives and verbs.	(V) ~ Identifies what was learned in the conference.
<b>Flora</b>	I think I am not good at grammar and I don't know when I should use a particular tense.	(V) ~ Identifies what was learned in the conference.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you Tom?	
<b>Tom</b>	I have been using 'first of all' followed by 'second' for many years without realizing	+V ~ Identifies conference as source of

	that this pattern was wrong. Now I realise I should start off using 'firstly' before I can use 'secondly'. The conference helped me improve my grammar.	new understanding
<b>Teacher</b>	Any others grammar examples?	
<b>Tom</b>	I realise that I should not useing form after infinitive "I go to stopping their smoking".	+V ~ Identifies conference as source of new understanding.
<b>Teacher</b>	You have tried written and verbal feedback. Which do you prefer?	
<b>Flora</b>	Verbal. If feedback is conducted on a one-to-one basis, you can understand the problems you have and think of solutions to solve them. Teachers can also discuss with the students the other problematic areas they have in their class work or other English writing.	+V ~ Identifies conferences as a source for individual help and problem solving.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you Candy? Which do you prefer?	
<b>Candy</b>	If feedback is provided on a one-to-one basis, teachers can guide students to think of the reasons why they made mistakes.	+V ~ Advantages of verbal feedback are again highlighted: it can provide teachers with the opportunity to guide students to understand the reasons for their mistakes in writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	Can you give an example?	
<b>Candy</b>	During conferencing, teachers can guide the students to think of the reasons why they made mistakes whereas written feedback usually points out the mistakes with an underline.	+V, XW ~ A comparison with the use of verbal and written feedback is given: the interaction in a conference can prompt students to identify reasons for making mistakes and this is absent in written feedback.
<b>Teacher</b>	Are you saying that you find it useful when you are asked to explain the reason for making the mistakes?	~ Interviewer seeks clarification.
<b>Candy</b>	Yes, this can deepen the memory. I have to think about it myself.	+V ~ The benefits of verbal feedback are again highlighted: prompt students to think over what they had done

		wrong in their writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you?	
<b>Tom</b>	On a one-to-one basis teachers should also think of the reasons why students make mistakes and why they are unable to interpret the situation properly. If teachers can consider students' failure to respond to the topic and to write correctly, this will better help the students	+V ~ The benefits of verbal feedback are again highlighted but with further elaboration: in a conference session, not only the student is prompted to understand the reason for making mistakes, the teacher is also able to understand why the student made mistakes; this interactional nature of verbal feedback is absent with written feedback.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you really like English?	
<b>Tom</b>	So, so. It is because I know very little vocabulary and I can't write long essays. I do not like reading English books.	XE
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you think if you make improvement in writing ability you might feel better about learning English?	
<b>Tom</b>	Yes, certainly because English is an international language and I can learn more.	+E ~ The student seems to contradict himself with his previous response about his negative attitude towards the learning of English: his lack of vocabulary and inability to write long essay. With reference to his response here, it seems to suggest that he may be able to adopt a more positive attitude in learning English if he can overcome his two problems. This is supported by his subsequent claim that he realizes he can learn more English because it is an international language.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you, Flora	
<b>Flora</b>	I am interested in learning English but I just don't have the confidence to use English to communicate with native speakers of English. A good command of English will help with developing of one's career. I just don't have the confidence to use English	+E ~ She expresses a positive attitude towards the learning of English and she shares the views of other students in the group of the advantages in learning English, but

	for communication purposes except with my friends. It is because I am afraid the Westerners may not understand what I want to convey to them. They will ask the question “what you are talking about?” I will feel very embarrassed.	the response she has given seems not to be directly relevant to the question she is being asked.
<b>Teacher</b>	Are you saying you don’t really have much confidence in using English? Fanny, you seemed to have written quite a good essay, I find it quite surprising that you don’t have much confidence in using English. Do you think if you improve in your writing ability, this will help to increase your confidence in using English?	~ The teacher tries to rephrase her question and put the question again to the student.
<b>Flora</b>	Certainly. If you can write well, you can also speak. Therefore, if you can write well this can help you with your spoken English. I hope I will be able to converse in English with westerners.	+E ~ The student attempts to respond to the teacher’s question: she acknowledges the fact that improvement in writing ability can help to build up her confidence to communicate with westerners.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you Candy? Do you think improvement in writing English can help to arouse your interest in learning English?	
<b>Candy</b>	Yes, if you can write you can also speak the language and use English for communication purposes.	+E ~ She shares her view with the previous student and expresses her view that ability to write implies the ability to use the language for communication purposes.
<b>Teacher</b>	How do you feel about the conference today?	
<b>Candy</b>	I was able to identify my problems in writing but the most important thing is whether I can try to make improvement based on the suggestions given by the teacher.	+V ~ She acknowledges the benefits of verbal feedback: a better understanding of her own problems but the responsibility of whether she can make progress is directed towards herself.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you Flora?	
<b>Flora</b>	Similar to Candy, conferencing can deepen one’s learning experience because when an	+V ~ The advantages of verbal feedback

	essay is returned, students will just put the essay aside, but if there is a teacher who informs you the type of mistakes, this will deepen the learning experience.	are reiterated: to deepen her learning experience.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you Tom?	
<b>Tom</b>	To reinforce memory. I will remember the mistakes made and when I think back of today's experience, I will avoid making similar mistakes in the next piece of writing.	+V ~ The student echoes the view of other students and reiterates the advantages of verbal feedback: to reinforce his memory and help him avoid making similar mistakes in his writing.

End of Transcript

### Summary of Group interview (1)

All students with their range of standards in English generally had negative feelings towards the feedback they received for their writing. They expressed no confidence in writing 500 words as required by their teacher. The average and the weakest students commented that they were very frustrated seeing many red marks on their paper each time when their writing was returned to them. The students claimed that they generally had no problem understanding the written feedback of their teacher and the teacher had gone through the common errors of the class. One thing worth noticing is that as students did their corrections, they copied the corrections of the teacher word by word without thinking or even understanding the reason why they made mistakes in their writing, and they frankly revealed that they would probably make the same mistakes in the next piece of writing. After experiencing the teacher-student conferencing, students expressed their preference for verbal feedback though they were aware of the time constraint in view of the number of students in the class. Each

student then took turns to describe what they had learned from the conference they had just had with the teacher, such as receiving guidance to help them interpret the topic correctly and having the chance to ask for explanations of individual problems. Students claimed that the improvement in their writing ability and language proficiency could help to develop their confidence to use English for communication purposes and to interact with others in English.

**Tally for comments**

	<b>Tom</b>	<b>Flora</b>	<b>Candy</b>
Positive about written f'back	3	2	1
Negative about written f'back	4	3	4
Neutral about written f'back	2	4	3
Positive about verbal f'back	8	5	8
Negative about verbal f'back	0	0	0
Neutral about verbal f'back	1	3	1
Positive about writing English	1	2	1
Negative about writing English	1	0	3
Neutral about writing English	0	0	0

## 10.2 Interview 2

The same codes as in interview 1 were used in the analysis.

	Exchanges	Comments
<b>Teacher</b>	You have just finished another writing task. How did you feel when you got your paper back?	
<b>Flora</b>	I made some silly mistakes and I didn't like to see that. I should have less red marks.	
<b>Teacher</b>	So you didn't make less mistakes this time?	
<b>Flora</b>	No. I want to be better. But not yet.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Were you upset to see your paper?	
<b>Flora</b>	A bit. I don't like silly mistake. But I know I can ask questions and get help. It's okay for me.	+V ~ Seems to be implying that the conference makes it easier for her to bear error identification.
<b>Teacher</b>	You mean you can ask in the conference?	~ Clarifying
<b>Flora</b>	Yes. If I don't understand I can ask in the conference.	
<b>Teacher</b>	(Looking at Tom and Flora) And how about you?	
<b>Tom</b>	I feel fine about it. My paper is okay. I understand the mistakes. I understand 80% to 90% of the marking of the teacher.	+W ~ Repeats same sentiment as in first interview. ~ Understands written feedback
<b>Teacher</b>	Candy?	
<b>Candy</b>	I am the same as Flora. Some silly mistakes.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Did you understand all the corrections on your paper?	
<b>Candy</b>	Sometimes. Really I only understand 10 to 20% of the teachers' marking. If I understand I will not make mistakes. Teachers often underline the mistakes but explanations are not given. But the same as Flora, I can ask about anything I don't understand.	+V, XW ~ Identifies conference as chance for clarification. ~ Failure of written feedback to help with understanding

<b>Teacher</b>	So if there was no conference you could not fix your paper?	
<b>Candy</b>	No, then I only make the corrections the teacher shows me on the paper.	XW ~ Written feedback does not help her redraft.
<b>Teacher</b>	If there were no conference, would you ask the teacher?	
<b>Tom</b>	I don't ask much.	
<b>Flora</b>	In the past, it was very embarrassing for me to ask questions because my classmates in the previous school were very bright and they seldom asked the teacher questions. If I asked questions, I would feel very embarrassed. It doesn't matter this year, because the language proficiency of students in the school is more or less the same as mine.	~ Safe and 'anonymous' environment is helpful for medium and low ability students who are not confident about asking for clarification in whole class settings.
<b>Teacher</b>	It sounds like you are saying that students don't ask questions because they may be afraid of looking foolish in front of classmates. Candy, what do you think about that?	
<b>Candy</b>	I would prefer to be able to ask the teacher in private. Actually I prefer to have individual attention from the teacher. I have a better chance of understanding the reasons for my problems. When I was in Form 5, I often didn't understand the reasons for the mistakes in the writing. If someone talks to me about it though I can have someone explain the problems in my writing and this is a good thing.	+ V ~ The response of this student seems to echo with the response of Flora: the preference of a private place to discuss individual problems in writing
<b>Teacher</b>	So now you have all had another experience with conferencing. I wonder if you can tell me if it was helpful for you. (Pause) Tom?	
<b>Tom</b>	Of course. I asked some questions and the teacher asked me more about the paper – what I was thinking.	~ No comment from other participants, so the interviewer offers a follow-up, more probing question.
<b>Teacher</b>	What did you ask about?	



<b>Tom</b>	I asked how to make my writing better.	
<b>Teacher</b>	Hmm. Big question. Did you get a good answer?	
<b>Tom</b>	We talked about how to organize my paper better. Now I understand how to organise the ideas and structure the essay. We talked about writing a paragraphing that mentions the connection between the problem followed by the solution. I also have some understanding of the grammatical items wrongly used.	+V ~ Describes how conferencing has helped him to understand the problems in his writing
<b>Teacher</b>	Are you talking about learning how to make the transition between paragraphs and connecting paragraphs?	
<b>Tom</b>	Yes, how to arrange the ideas, just like making a dish presentable.	
<b>Teacher</b>	So you learned more about organising your ideas. How about you two? How did the conference help with the content in your writing?	
<b>Candy</b>	For example, in my essay the third point is irrelevant to the topic just because I had nothing to say. I was unaware of the importance of the relevance of the content of the essay in relation to the topic. Therefore, I did not realise that I should mention the solutions to the problems previously mentioned in the essay and not asking my friend to offer me suggestions to solve the problems which occurred in my lesson.	+V ~ Describes how conferencing has helped to understand the problems in her writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you Flora?	
<b>Flora</b>	Yes. When I was told that I wrote the second point about homework, I did not realise that it was unrelated to the topic until I was told by the teacher that it has nothing to do with the topic. I had a point which was correct but I lacked the vocabulary to express the idea, therefore I used the wrong word and I lost the point.	+V ~ Describes how conferencing has helped her to understand the problems in her writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	Did the conference help with your language too?	

<b>Flora</b>	The use of verbal feedback really helps me with the grammar, for example the use of tenses. I used to mix up the tenses, sometimes, I use present and sometimes I use past tense. And I don't understand the difference. It was pointed by Ms Leung that when I mentioned the problems, I should use past tense but when I make suggestions to solve the problem I can use present tense. I tend to be very confused if I have to express many different ideas at the same time, so learning this helped me understand how to use the tenses for lots of different ideas.	+V ~ Describes how conferencing has helped her to understand the problems in her writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you Tom? Did you learn anything that helped with the language in your essay?	
<b>Tom</b>	The teacher pointed out that the word after 'attention' must be followed by 'to'. I thought it sounded fluent if it is followed by 'on'.	+V ~ Describes how conferencing has helped him to understand the problems in his writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	How about you Candy?	
<b>Candy</b>	I learned how to distinguish between 'tell' and 'talk'. Before listening to the explanation of the teacher, I would not have known. I tend to think in Chinese and then translate the ideas directly into English and the expression is not so good.	+V ~ Describes how conferencing has helped him to understand the problems in her writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	So what do you think about verbal feedback? Does the feedback help you?	
<b>Candy</b>	I have never received this kind of individual feedback from the teacher before unless I approach the teacher myself after school.	(V) ~ Student fails to respond to the question asked by the interviewer; talking about the past even though she had two conferences.
<b>Teacher</b>	But now you have had two conferences. What do you think now?	
<b>Candy</b>	I think it helps me think more about my paper. It is better than just underline mistake.	+V
<b>Flora</b>	For me it is better too. Before The teacher will not give individual attention to students	XW, +V ~ She describes limitations in the

	but students can raise their hand if they have difficulty in understanding the marking of the teacher. The teacher will only approach the student only if the problem is very serious.	regular feedback process. ~ Finds verbal feedback better.
<b>Teacher</b>	Tom?	
<b>Tom</b>	I think there are both advantages and disadvantages in giving either form of feedback. This depends on the standard of students and there are advantages and disadvantages in each of the methods used. Teachers can save time if feedback is given to the whole class. If individual attention to students, then students may not afford the time to be able to spend with the teacher to receive individual feedback from them.	+V, +W ~ Finds good and bad in both, ~ Students lack of time for conferences! ~ Note that conferences and interviews occurred after school. In-class conferences could well be perceived differently.
<b>Teacher</b>	So there are advantages and disadvantages in both. Do you prefer to have individual feedback in a conference or written feedback?	
<b>Tom</b>	One to one is better for students. If teachers can talk to the students about their writing it is better. But even if verbal feedback is good, students may not have the time to spend with the teacher after school.	+V ~ Suggests that conferences should preferably be done during class time
<b>Teacher</b>	Flora, what kind of feedback do you prefer?	
<b>Flora</b>	I think I can benefit a lot from a conference because apart from pointing out the mistakes the teacher can also provide you alternative ways of expressing similar ideas to make them sound better. Just now the teacher has told me that there was a better way to express the same idea or some words to make the meaning easier to understand. They can help you solve your problems better,	+V
<b>Tom</b>	There is more interaction between teacher and student and discussion can be in greater depth. I think now I will have a deeper understanding of the problems I have in my writing than whole class discussion.	+V
<b>Teacher</b>	Greater than in written feedback though?	

<b>Tom</b>	Maybe. Written is good, but I don't always understand.	~ Note earlier that Tom reported understanding 80-90% of written comments/marking.
<b>Candy</b>	The teacher will be able to pinpoint particular problems to explain to the student. Since I am bad at English I can hardly write a good sentence. So discussing common errors in class doesn't help me much because I don't even know what they're talking about. I get confused because it's in English too and I can't understand the English.	+V ~ Candy compares one-on-one conferencing favourably with whole class feedback – although she seems to be exaggerating how poor her English is.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you have any problems with conferencing?	
<b>Tom</b>	It's good, but I don't have time to go after school. I have more things to do.	+V, XV ~ Meeting after school – does not apply to in school conferencing.
<b>Flora</b>	I think teachers don't have time to see us all. We are lucky ones now, but not all the time. Written feedback is okay too.	-V, +V, +W ~ More reference to the time factor, and skepticism about teachers' either having or making time for this. ~ Thinks being in a conference is "lucky".
<b>Teacher</b>	Candy, are there problems for you?	
<b>Candy</b>	No for me it's better. I understand better when the teacher talks just to me. I'm not good at writing. I need help to be better.	+V ~ Link with low English standard and need for conferencing.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you think you might feel more confident if verbal feedback is provided for you when each piece of writing is returned to you?	
<b>Flora</b>	I think this will help. But I think this help is only one-sided because if I were really to develop an interest in learning English, I must first of all be able to use language to communicate with others and to be understood. This is only one way of helping me to learn, and that is just for writing, but the most important thing to me is that I must be able to use the language for communication purposes, and then I will have confidence and interest in learning English.	+V ~ Apart from the first sentence, the response given by the student is not directly relevant to the question being asked.
<b>Candy</b>	Writing is difficult. I don't like to write	XE, +V

	many words, but maybe the teacher can help me.	~ Expressing optimism about the role of conferencing in helping her.
<b>Teacher</b>	Do you still think that getting better at writing will make you more motivated to learn English?	
<b>Tom</b>	Sure. If you don't have the language proficiency to perform a certain task, then you don't have the motivation to do the task well ... Maybe soon I can write longer essays. I might be more motivated.	~ Builds on response in interview 1.
<b>Teacher</b>	Motivation. So if you learn to do something better, you feel as if you will be more motivated? And what then?	
<b>Tom</b>	I think so. Maybe I will be confident to speak to native speakers.	~ It seems that student's ability to do something well is a pre-requisite for them to be motivated to do something even better.
<b>Flora</b>	If my writing ability is improved, I will try to use English to write my diary. So when I grow up I can look back and see the level of English I could use. It would be like a record of my growing up.	+E ~ Positive about the role of English writing in her life potentially.
<b>Candy</b>	I will do the same. I will not be scared to write anymore.	
<b>Teacher</b>	So, to finish up now, how did you feel about the conference you had today? Jason?	
<b>Tom</b>	It was helpful. I learned about organising my paragraphs. I asked some questions. I don't usually ask questions.	+V ~ Reiterates what he has learnt from the conference, he has taken the initiative to ask questions in the conference which is quite a breakthrough as he seldom asks his teacher for explanation if he has problems with his writing.
<b>Teacher</b>	Candy, how did you feel about the conference today?	
<b>Candy</b>	I think it can help me.	+V ~ Being positive about verbal feedback provided for him.
<b>Teacher</b>	Help you in what way?	

<b>Candy</b>	Write more accurately.	+V ~ Elaborate on the response that has just been given.
<b>Teacher.</b>	And Flora, how did you feel about the conference?	
<b>Flora</b>	I still don't know the teacher. I would like it better if my teacher did the conference so I could ask questions and not feel so embarrassed.	+V ~ The teacher with whom students are familiar is the ideal person for giving verbal feedback to students.

End of Transcript

### Tally for comments

	<b>Tom</b>	<b>Flora</b>	<b>Candy</b>
Positive about written f'back	2	1	0
Negative about written f'back	0	1	1
Neutral about written f'back	0	0	0
Positive about verbal f'back	7	7	10
Negative about verbal f'back	1	1	0
Neutral about verbal f'back	0	0	1
Positive about writing English	0	1	0
Negative about writing English	0	0	1
Neutral about writing English	0	0	0

# Addendum 11

## 11. RESEARCHER DIARY NOTES FOR FOLLOW-UP

### GROUP INTERVIEWS

#### 11.1 Group interview 1

##### 11.1.1 Tom (Highest scoring student)

*From 1 to 5 with 1 indicating the weakest and 5 the strongest*

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>		✓			
<b>Spontaneity</b>			✓		
<b>Confidence</b>			✓		
<b>Initiative</b>		✓			
<b>Extensive reply</b>		✓			

#### Post conference notes

Tom appeared to be quite confident when he was asked if he understood the topic of the writing. He was able to provide suggestions to make improvement to his writing. It was noted that the teacher had to take the initiative to ask him questions before he responded. This seems to be related to the Chinese culture that students are not expected to speak before they are asked to do so as a matter of respect. Teachers are expected to take a dominant role in deciding what students should learn. There was the impression that the conference was a question and answer session rather than Tom taking the initiative to set the agendas for the session.

However, Tom took the initiative to ask for clarifications about the use of tenses when he was asked if he would like to ask any questions in relation to grammar. He seemed to be quite pleased after the teacher had explained the differences between the use of present perfect tense and the past tense to him. This is also an indication that students in Hong Kong are very much error focused and do not really pay attention to the content of their writing.

### ***11.1.2 Flora (Mean scoring student)***

*From 1 to 5 with 1 indicating the weakest and 5 the strongest*

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>			✓		
<b>Spontaneity</b>				✓	
<b>Confidence</b>			✓		
<b>Initiative</b>			✓		
<b>Extensive reply</b>		✓			

Flora looked very disappointed when she realised that she had misinterpreted the topic for the writing she had done. However, when the teacher told her that she could benefit from this writing experience as this could make her to be more careful with the interpretation of the topic for writing in the future, she nodded and smiled. Instead of adopting an attitude of indifference, Flora was eager to find out from the teacher why the content of her writing was irrelevant to the topic because she felt supported and was motivated to do better in her writing the next time. She contributed readily, and seemed fairly at ease.



### 11.1.3 Candy (Lowest scoring student)

*From 1 to 5 with 1 indicating the weakest and 5 the strongest*

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>	✓				
<b>Spontaneity</b>		✓			
<b>Confidence</b>	✓				
<b>Initiative</b>	✓				
<b>Extensive reply</b>	✓				

Candy seemed to be very nervous and shy when seeing the teacher and she put her head down most of the time and did not dare to look at the teacher. There was little eye contact. She hesitated quite often before giving responses to the teacher's questions. Even when responses were given, they were mostly short answers. After the teacher had provided her with some leading questions to guide her with her thinking, she seemed to be more relaxed when and was able to provide appropriate answers to the teacher's questions.

## 11.2 Group interview 2

### 11.2.1 Tom

*From 1 to 5 with 1 indicating the weakest and 5 the strongest*

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>			✓		
<b>Spontaneity</b>			✓		
<b>Confidence</b>				✓	
<b>Initiative</b>		✓			
<b>Extensive reply</b>			✓		

Tom seemed confident in his use of English – both stated, when he said he could understand 80-90% of the teacher’s written feedback – and by his quite confident manner of talking about his work. Tom was able to converse in a slightly more relaxed manner than I remembered from the first interview. He was still quite hesitant in asking questions he had in mind and had not taken much initiative in setting the agenda for discussion at the conference, but he was able to give extensive replies when he was asked how he could make improvement to his writing, such as arranging his ideas in a more systematic and organised way. Although the points of discussion were mainly teacher generated, he took a fair share of talking time, listened attentively and seemed to be satisfied and convinced each time suggestions to solve his problems were given.

### 11.2.2 Flora

*From 1 to 5 with 1 indicating the weakest and 5 the strongest*

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>			✓		
<b>Spontaneity</b>			✓		
<b>Confidence</b>				✓	
<b>Initiative</b>				✓	
<b>Extensive reply</b>			✓		

Flora seemed to be quite confident with her writing ability. Although Flora demonstrated a great desire to improve her writing ability, which she displayed last time too, and was able to give extensive replies in comparison with her performance at the first conference session, she still failed to take the initiative to ask questions at the conference. But there was no doubt about her enthusiasm for the talking, and she

looked quite pleased when praised for the things she did well in her writing. She said she felt embarrassed, but this was not evident in her posture or interaction particularly.

### 11.2.3 Candy

*From 1 to 5 with 1 indicating the weakest and 5 the strongest*

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Student ease</b>	✓				
<b>Spontaneity</b>	✓				
<b>Confidence</b>	✓				
<b>Initiative</b>		✓			
<b>Extensive reply</b>	✓				

Candy seemed not to have much confidence in learning English and it seemed that she was used to having low marks for his writing. She approached the conference tentatively and still kept staring at the desk instead of looking at the teacher during the conference. There was little sign of any initiation at first, although after a period of listening to the teacher's explanations and started asking the teacher questions hesitantly on issues she did not understand, for example, difference in meaning of words which looked similar, such as effective/affective, talk/tell. Overall, responses were still short and hesitant. She listened attentively.