## FEEDBACK ON STUDENTS' WRITING: WHAT SHOULD TEACHERS DO?

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| INFO ARTIKEL | ABSTRAK |
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| | Keterampilan menulis dalam bahasa Inggris dianggap sulit karena memerlukan pemahaman bahasa dan latihan yang terus-menerus. Penelitian ini merinci hasil penelitian Adel (2017) yang mengeksplorasi umpan balik guru terhadap tulisan mahasiswa di Swedia, terutama fokus pada metadiskursus, seperti visibilitas penulis/pembaca dan visibilitas teks/kode. Temuan Adel mencakup enam pertimbangan penting dalam memberikan umpan balik yang efektif terhadap tulisan mahasiswa, terutama di tingkat pendidikan tinggi. Penelitian menyoroti peran visibilitas dalam membantu mahasiswa memahami fokus revisi tulisan mereka. Namun, belum memberikan solusi konkret terkait masalah komunikasi dan menekankan pentingnya waktu, kejelasan, dan motivasi dalam memberikan umpan balik yang tidak hanya segera tetapi juga jelas, spesifik, dan memotivasi tanpa merendahkan mahasiswa. Pentingnya menjaga kerahasiaan umpan balik dan menetapkan kriteria evaluasi yang jelas juga ditekankan, dengan harapan dapat meningkatkan keterampilan menulis mahasiswa di tingkat pendidikan tinggi. |
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| | ***ABSTRACT***<br>*Writing skills in English are considered difficult because they require a constant understanding of the language and practice. This study details the results of Adel's (2017) research that explored teacher feedback on student writing in Sweden, especially focusing on metadiscourses, such as author/reader visibility and text/code visibility. Adel's findings include six important considerations in providing effective feedback on student writing, especially at the higher education level. Research highlights the role of visibility in helping students understand the focus of their writing revisions. However, it has not provided concrete solutions to communication problems and emphasizes the importance of time, clarity, and motivation in providing feedback that is not only immediate but also clear, specific, and motivating without degrading students. The importance of maintaining the confidentiality of feedback and establishing clear evaluation criteria is also emphasized, in the hope of improving students' writing skills at the higher education level.*<br>*\*Author: Febrina Rizky Agustina*<br>*Email : nec.febrina@gmail.com* |

## Introduction

Writing may be the most difficult skill to do for English learners. Not only difficult in terms of the language, but also in the art of writing itself. In order to achieve a good writing in English, one must have acquired the basic knowledge of English and adapt in practicing writing constantly (Muradi, 2016) (Widodo, 2021) (Oensyar & Hifni, 2015). For these reasons, In Indonesian secondary schools, the curriculum tends to put English writing in the even semester - following the sequence of learning the first language. Meanwhile, students in tertiary level of educations are usually required to produce papers at the end of the semester in order to pass a course. Writing papers does not mean that the students have already mastered the art of writing, specifically

writing academic papers. Having the students write as a requirement to pass a course is a part of many ways to sharpen their skills. Teachers are also able to give some guidance via giving feedback throughout the writing process. As according to Hillocks' (1982, in Fladd, 2011) research, it was revealed that students who receive feedbacks on their writings tend to develop better writing in the future. Therefore, as writing is a part of long-life learning, teachers as the classroom facilitators should aid them in writing by giving feedbacks in order for them to develop and perform better in academic writing.

Having an interest in teacher's feedback, Adel's article 2017 under the title Remember that your reader cannot read your mind: problem/solution-oriented metadiscourse in teacher feedback on students' writing (Ädel, 2017). Is employed as the main reference for this critical review. Her article was intriguing as it attempted to study teacher's feedback from the linguistic side – metadiscourse - since this area is less discussed compared to other areas of feedback study. Many researches on feedback tend to revolve around the use of corrective feedback which focuses on grammar correction, the perspectives of teacher or students towards feedback. Yet, she focused her work on students' written work in tertiary level of education in Sweden in which teacher's feedback was given accordingly not to point out the grammar mistakes, but to guide the students to write an academic essay in linguistics. From her work, Adel found that in order for the students to act according to what the teacher intended, the notion of metadiscourse - writer/reader and text/code visibilities - are required.

This paper attempts to further discuss the results of Adel's findings, which are to reveal six things to consider in providing good feedbacks towards students' writings, and what characteristics of a feedback may give better results in students' writing outcomes, especially in tertiary level of education.

In terms of writer/reader visibility, Adel (2017) investigated the first and second person pronouns which make references to the writer or the reader as the participant of the discourse so that the feedback may count as metadiscourse. As it has been previously stated, the existence of the pronouns should be accompanied by discourse referential and it must be directed towards the current text. The examples are presented by Adel in figure 2.

(1) *This is fine here, but "you" as a generic pronoun is rather marked in academic writing.*
(2) *you become overweight but develop obesity or too much body fat.*
(3) *...submit a new version of the summary. (You can just e-mail it to me directly.)*

**Figure 2. Writer/reader visibility**

From figure 2, it can be perceived that none of the sentences above is counted as metadiscourse. Sentence number 3 may be counted as metadiscourse because it has second person pronoun which reveals the reader visibility by referring to a specific reader – the current reader, yet it does not make a reference towards the current discourse, rather it points to an activity outside the discourse. Nevertheless, Adel (2017) made some exceptions towards such metadiscursive uses. In addition, in Adel's

work, writer's visibility occurred less than reader's visibility as it was shown through a number of 'you' appearances within the texts.

Adel (2017) concluded from her study that the utilization of 'I' in teachers' feedbacks tended to be about providing suggestions towards the students' writing in order to improve the quality of their written texts according to the teachers' interpretations. Meanwhile, the utilization of 'you' was usually to highlight what the students might have missed doing in the texts rather than commenting whether their works have met the requirements or not. So far, the utilization of the first and second person pronouns as writer or reader visibility rarely or did not occur in other types of academic discourses, but feedbacks.

Regarding text or code visibility, it refers to the direct reference in the feedbacks which point to the current discourse – the text on which feedbacks were given. As Adel (2017) revealed that there were several ways to establish text or code visibility in feedbacks For example, by referring to the current texts using terms such as: essay, paragraph, text, sentence, phrase, word , or 'here' and 'now', it means that a writer has shown a code or text visibility. As for the use of 'here' and 'now' as endophoric marker (Hyland, 1998, in Adel, 2017) - which Adel referred as Phorics- were intended to represent a certain or some aspects in the current text. For clearer explanation, Adel provided some examples as presented in figure 3.

(15) *Perhaps add an example* here *to make it clearer to the reader?*
(16) *You could use "health"* here.
(17) *Not sure about the question mark* here *as this is not really a question.*
(18) *I don't quite follow what you mean* here.

**Figure 3. The use of Endophoric marker**

From Adel's (2017) study towards teachers' feedbacks on students' written assignments showed that from five teachers as participants, all of them employed writer/reader visibility, and text/code visibility within their feedbacks. The 'consistency' in metadiscourse in her study strengthened her hypothesis regarding to a great number of metadiscource occurrence in feedbacks as part of reflexivity compared to other types of academic discourses.

**Research Methods**

According to the Adel's (2017) observations with regard to metadiscourse occurrence, she brought three prominent observations to the surface: (a) Metadiscouse that is problem or solution-oriented, (b) feedback as a supporting genre: implications for the criterion of the current text, (c) specific versus general reference and the complexity of writer-reader roles.

In respect of the first observation, most of the metadiscourse found in the teachers' feedbacks were intended to point out and give comments on the problems occurring in the students' writing. By using the writer visibility – first person pronoun- and refering to the same text – code visibility, it indicated that the teachers provided suggestions towards the students' writing, whilst the use of second person pronoun indicated to point out the flaws in the writing, the aspects needed to be revised, and

what the students were required to do. However in Adel's study, the occurrence of 'you' was more dominant in teachers' feedbacks, resulting in the domination of negative feedbacks within the students' writings. Regarding the second observation, feedback could not be separated from the original text on which the feedback was given. Such characteristic portrayed feedback as a 'supporting genre' due to the dependency between the current discourse and the feedback itself. As for the last observation, Adel admitted that she was unable to directly denote 'the current writer' or 'the current reader' as a metadiscourse. This was due to the complexity of the roles on who became 'the writer' and who became 'the reader'. Examples on the role complexity are presented in figure 4.

(24) *Readers cannot read the minds of writers.* [general reference]
(25) *Remember that your reader cannot read your mind so things which may…* [specific or general reference]
(26) *don't take it for granted that your readers will be familiar with this* [specific or even general reference]
(27) *you're leaving it up to the reader to interpret this.* [either general or specific reference]

**Figure 4. Role Complexity**

It can be perceived from figure 4 that the utilization of specific and general reference on the roles of writer and reader is significant. Specific reference is made to indicate the current writer/reader which will be counted as metadiscourse, whilst the general reference indicates audiences in general. The use of these references is intended to avoid confusions in determining metadiscourse according to the reflexive triangle (figure 1).

**Results and Discussion**

From Adel's work, it can be concluded that feedbacks play an important role in promoting students' writing quality, especially in terms of academic writing. However, she only mentioned the occurrence of writer/reader visibility, and text/code visibility which helped the students to figure out what aspects they should focus on in revising their writings. She did not portray further on the solutions regarding the issue of 'your reader cannot read your mind' which may be the key towards the betterment of students' writing skill through feedback provisions.

Prior to further explanation on how feedback affect students' writing performance, Hattie and Timperley (2007) defined feedback as "information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding". Feedback cannot 'stand alone' (Adel, 2017), so it cannot be separated from the original source or the discourse in which feedback is given and vice versa. It indicates that the type of feedback given is strongly influenced by the discourse – in this case, students' writing performance - and so is the discourse.

Accordingly, in developing writing skill, students tend to rely on feedback provisions by their teachers to proceed on revising their writings. This is because students tend to 'pay attention' to the feedbacks given as they consider them useful (Higgins & Hartley, 2002) contrary to the beliefs of some scholars in the past (Orsmond et al., 2013) (Doan, 2013). According to Bitchener, et.al (2010, in Adel 2017), students pay attentions because feedback provisions tend to have one or two things on which to comment, namely: (a) content knowledge – it deals with the

accuracy, completeness, and relevance of the text with what is being assessed; (b) genre knowledge – the functions of the text; (c) rhetorical structure and organization; (d) argument development –coherence and cohesion of the texts; (e) linguistic accuracy and appropriateness. For these reasons, providing clear instructions and comments towards students' writing plays a significant role.

According to Fladd 2011, it is important for the students to understand teachers' feedbacks in order for them to benefit from the feedback itself (Fladd, 2011). The benefits the students may receive, aside from what have been mentioned, according to Brown and Glover (2006) are to know their grade - capacity in writing skill through the types of feedbacks given – through the dominant occurrences of negative or positive feedbacks. Also, feedback allows them to enhance their writings through the guidance of the comments. However, as important as it is to provide feedbacks on students' writing, apparently not every teacher does it in a proper manner (Endicott, 2022).

Many teachers, especially those who do not major in teaching writing course, still disregard the power of feedback. Some teachers choose to postpone feedback provisions on students' works until later (Brookhart, 2017). Some others do even not bother to provide sufficient time to thoroughly assess their students' work and give feedbacks; without realizing that this can be harmful to the students' motivation and psychological side. Students may think that their works are really bad that they do not even worth of feedbacks (Holmes & Papageorgiou, 2009) (Deeley et al., 2019) (Maggs, 2014).

Teachers are strongly encouraged to provide sufficient and effective feedbacks for the sake of students' improvement in writing skill. Based on several sources, there are several things for teachers to consider in providing feedbacks to students' writing.

First of all, in providing feedback, teachers ought to mind the timing (Brown & Glover, 2006) (Li & De Luca, 2014) (Higgins et al., 2002). It is very important to give feedback as soon as possible especially when their minds are still going with the assignment. If teachers put off the feedback provision say, one month after the assignment was due, it may cause the message fail to get across. The students may have difficulties in connecting between their previous writing performance and the outcome that the teacher desires. The longer it takes to give feedbacks, the stronger the tendency of forgetting for the students, and the less effective the feedback is. Therefore, to make feedbacks more effective, teachers are strongly encouraged to not delay too long on giving feedbacks and revisions.

Moreover, it should be greatly considered that teachers spare some times to comment on students' works since according to Race (1999, in Holmes & Papagerogieou, 2009) students require 'individual or small group' feedbacks to improve. In most cases, teachers who do not give 'special' time to give feedbacks tend to provide very little comments and only focus on giving grade. For this reason, students may unable to grasp the blurry instructions on what they are supposed to do. Furthermore, the results of students' views towards feedbacks in Price, et.al.'s (2010) research revealed that students grew doubtful towards teacher's very sparse and limited comments upon their works because they did not think that their teachers really

read their works. Thus, by sparing some times to give feedback, students are likely to gain trust towards the teachers' feedbacks. If the teachers provide some times to give feedback properly, such cases will unlikely to occur, instead, it will result in the students making further progress in their writing.

Another aspect to consider is that teachers ought to be legible (Higgins & Hartley, 2002) and specific in pointing out on which parts in their writings the students have gone astray. Many students are likely to get confused and end up in elaborating the teachers' feedback differently or sometimes beyond from what it was intended, especially if they receive very limited comments with no other explanations. This is in line with Charnock's (2000, in Fladd, 2011) research that even a common term such as the word 'analyze' could cause misinterpretation in students' minds. Therefore, being specific and providing context and creating a dialogue feedback is also more preferred by the students (Price, et.al, 2010) as it can lead them to a more focused action to take. In addition, employing concrete words instead of abstract words in giving feedback can help the students to "note the gaps between their performance and desired standards" according to Blown and Glover (2006). For instance, by employing the notion of metadiscourse and referring to the reflexive triangle in figure 1, students as the reader of the discourse will be able to determine whether the teacher is making a suggestion or pointing out the flaws in their works.

Providing feedbacks should not only focus in critically correcting errors within the works, but it should also be motivational (Higgins & Hartley, 2002). The term motivational here refers to the ability to encourage students for further learning (Brown & Glover, 2006). However, it does not mean that feedback should not point out on the errors at all. Rather, the teacher is strongly encouraged to carefully select their words and provide further explanations on what they desire the students to do. As Brookhart (2008) illustrated in her books that comments such as "You won't find much about carrier pigeons. That's too narrow a topic. Pick something else," may result in a negative effect towards student-teacher communication. Students will either get confused on what else to write or worst, lose their motivation to continue writing. Moreover, having constant negative feedbacks can lead the students to having low self-esteem Murthagh 2009 which results in no motivation. Therefore, the writing tone, style and choice of words also play a great role in determining the effectiveness of a feedback (Murtagh & Baker, 2009).

Teachers should also consider the confidentiality of the feedback. Brown & Glover (2006) stated that effective feedback also means to be personal. In Holmes & Papagerogieou's (2009) research, it was revealed that some students prefer to have their feedbacks private such as sent personally to their emails than having the teachers bluntly reveal the results in front of the class, specifically if the feedbacks given contain more negative comments. This is in line with Higgins and Hartley 2002 who stated that in order for feedbacks become effective, one of the settings is to "be personal and tailored to the individual student". By doing so, the students will likely feel less embarrassed since the results are only shared between the teacher and that particular student only.

Furthermore, effective feedback ought to follow explicit and clear evaluation criteria (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Many times teachers and students may have different perspectives on the criteria of passing a certain assignment. Therefore, teachers need to clarify the learning objectives Hattie & Timperley, 2007 by preparing for instance, an evaluation sheet with descriptions of criteria in order to share the same views on the 'expected standards' with the students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This evaluation sheet is intended to guide the teachers in assessing the students' works and to make a fair judgment towards their writings. Students can also make a justification towards their own writings, in case the teacher undervalues their works at some points.

**Conclusion**

Article investigated the occurrence of metadiscourse in teachers' feedbacks through observing the writer/reader and code/text visibilities. She intended to highlight the effectiveness of these metadiscourse in conveying the teachers' message to the students. However, she did not go further on what other aspects to consider in providing feedbacks on students' writings. To sum up, this paper attempts to exhibit several points that teachers should consider in giving the students' feedbacks, namely: (a) the timing of giving feedback – the sooner, the better; (b) spared time for giving feedbacks – saving some time to check on the students' works; (c) legibility and specific – providing clear and unambiguous comments using the notion of metadiscourse; (d) motivational feedback – commenting without lowering students' self-esteem and giving more suggestions instead; (e) feedback confidentiality – giving personal feedback is more preferred; (f) clear evaluation criteria – teachers ought to provide an assessment sheet so both students and teachers may share the same perspectives on the learning goal.

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