

ISSN: 2575-9809

RW

RESPONSE TO WRITING

VOLUME 4 ISSUE 2 FALL 2018

Copyrights

© JRW & Authors.

Copyright for these articles is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the Journal. These are open-access articles distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

“They Said I Have a Lot to Learn”: How Teacher Feedback Influences Advanced University Students’ Views of Writing

Dana Ferris

University of California, Davis

This study examines the relationship between students’ memories of teacher feedback and these students’ writing and attitudes toward and enjoyment of writing. More than 8,500 survey responses were collected from advanced undergraduate students in a large university writing program. A question about the characteristics of teacher feedback received by student respondents was examined both quantitatively and qualitatively. Second, responses to a different survey question about students’ attitudes toward writing were statistically compared with their reported memories of teacher feedback. Responses to the teacher feedback and writing attitudes questions from different student subgroups (analyzed by first language backgrounds and by when they matriculated at the university) were also compared statistically. Results showed that students had a wide range of reactions, some positive and some negative, to teacher feedback. There also was a strong relationship between their self-reported enjoyment of writing and how they have experienced teacher feedback. Further, it was clear that multilingual students expressed more negative attitudes toward writing in general and reported less positive experiences with teacher feedback. The study suggests that students attend to and have a range of reactions to teacher feedback and that teachers should be self-reflective and sensitive about their response practices, particularly when responding to multilingual students about language issues.

Keywords: teacher feedback, writing attitudes, multilingual student writers

Since the earliest days of composition research on teacher response to student writing, scholars have warned about the potential of instructor feedback to demoralize and disempower student writers (e.g., Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Sommers, 1982). In my own career as a teacher educator, I have on many occasions conducted classes and workshops for pre-service or new teachers on strategies for response to student writing, and I typically begin by eliciting participants’ own memories of the feedback they have received about their writing from teachers over the years. After several decades of such discussions, I have moved beyond being shocked by what I hear, but I am nonetheless still saddened:

- A new teacher, with a graduate degree, described a moment years earlier in high school when her English teacher held up her paper in front of the whole class, ripped it to shreds, and said, “That’s what I think about your paper!”
- A graduate student pursuing an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages said that in his first-year college composition class, after he wrote the first paper, his teacher said to him, “You know, some people aren’t cut out for college.”
- Several prospective teachers who were nonnative speakers of English recalled receiving some version of this written comment: “I will not read this until you correct your grammar.”
- My own daughter, a stellar student who received straight As throughout high school and went off at age 17 to a top university, was devastated when a high school English teacher wrote on her paper, “Not the quality of work I’m accustomed to seeing from you. I’m very disappointed.”

These anecdotes have three things in common. First, the teacher comments caused so much embarrassment and pain that the recipients vividly remembered them, word for word, even many years later. Second, not one of these comments is at all helpful or constructive. Even the backhanded “assistance” offered by demanding that the student fix his or her “grammar” before being deemed worthy of a reading does not provide the writer with any specifics about patterns of error or strategies for editing the text: It just demands that the student solve the problem as if she or he had not cared enough to do so in the first place. Third, the comments in these stories

read as mean-spirited, designed to humiliate and express frustration toward the students rather than to actually teach them something. These comments show us a lot more about the teachers than they do about the student writers themselves.

As a consequence of such concerns, for the past 30–40 years or so, college writing instructors have been trained to avoid being overbearing and appropriative (Sommers, 1982) in responding to student writers, to converse with them in the margins by asking questions rather than barking out orders, and to avoid premature focus on surface concerns (grammar and mechanics) so that student writers can work first on discovering ideas through drafting and revision. Through recent research, we have learned more about teacher goals, principles, and frustrations in responding to student writing (e.g., Ferris 2014; Ferris, Brown, Liu, & Stine, 2011; Ferris, Liu, & Rabie, 2011; Matsuda, Saenkhum, & Accardi, 2013; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). But how do today's students describe the teacher feedback that they have received, and how do they characterize its effects on their own attitudes toward writing?

Though there have been previous studies on student reactions to and views of teacher response (e.g., Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Straub, 1997), most tend to focus on (a) what students perceive their teachers' response priorities are (i.e., ideas vs. grammar) or (b) what students prefer (or don't) in teacher feedback. Such studies have also focused on younger students—high school students or first-year college students. The few studies that have looked more closely at students' affective responses to teacher feedback tend to be smaller, case-study designs (e.g., Hyland, 1998; Sperling & Freedman, 1987).

The study described in this paper takes a different approach toward examining student memories of teacher feedback. First, it draws upon data from a longitudinal survey study in a large university writing program, a study that collected more than 8,500 student responses in a five-year period. Second, the respondent population is advanced university students (mostly seniors) who are reflecting back not only upon their high school experiences but also upon previous college-level writing they have done, including first-year composition instruction and writing within their majors or disciplines. Third, through cross-tabulation

of survey responses and qualitative analysis of students’ verbal comments, this study endeavors to connect students’ reported experiences with teacher feedback to their feelings about writing in general. Because of the study’s size, target population, and retrospective insights gathered, it adds new and distinct insights about how teacher feedback may affect students’ views of writing over time.

Background

Few teachers or scholars would disagree with the assertion that teacher commentary has power to either motivate or discourage student writers (for a recent, cogent summary on this point, see Macklin, 2016). However, research studies in which student writers are specifically asked about how they feel about or react to teacher feedback have been relatively limited. These studies tend to divide into two categories, although there is some overlap. In the first set of studies, students are asked to describe their teachers’ priorities in giving feedback. For example, Cohen (1987) surveyed first-year college students about the focus of their teachers’ commentary; these students reported that their teachers mostly emphasized grammar issues. Later studies (e.g., Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994) reported that students observed a broader range of teacher priorities (ideas and organization in addition to grammar and vocabulary). A study by Montgomery and Baker (2007) identified mismatches between how teachers described their own feedback philosophies (focused on idea development, especially early in the writing process) and how their students characterized the feedback they had received (more focused on grammar, and analyses of text samples supported the students’ observations rather than those of the teachers). In some cases, these researchers also inquired as to student observations about teacher feedback at different points in the writing process (i.e., intermediate vs. final drafts, e.g., Ferris, 1995).

The second line of research asked students about their own preferences regarding teacher feedback and invited them to discuss their past reactions to (or problems with) feedback they had received. Straub (1997) gave students a sample list of actual teacher comments, asking them to rate and respond to the feedback as if they themselves were the student writers. He found that students appreciated feedback on a range of writing

issues that utilized either open-ended questions or detailed guidance for revision and disliked feedback they viewed as controlling or unhelpful. Several studies reported that students disliked or were confused by cryptic comments such as “Confusing,” by error codes or correction symbols or even by illegibility of instructor feedback (Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Lee, 2008). In others, students said they wished for comprehensive direct correction of their errors by their teachers (Lee, 2008; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988). Students also generally claimed to take teacher feedback seriously, to read it carefully, and to find it helpful (Brice, 1995; Enginarlar, 1993; Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Hyland, 1998, 2003), though teachers themselves tend to doubt that students attend to the responses they have labored over (Ferris, Liu, & Rabie, 2011). Findings from several case studies also suggest that the nature of the relationship between the teacher and student influences how students feel about teacher feedback (Hyland, 1998; Lee & Schallert, 2008; Sperling & Freedman, 1987). For example, if a teacher was perceived by students as overly controlling, students were likely to comply with feedback (i.e., do exactly what they were told and no more) but not necessarily to engage substantively in revising their texts.

Research designs examining student views of teacher feedback have typically consisted of surveys or questionnaires, including Straub’s (1997) rating task in which student writers reacted to decontextualized teacher comments, or triangulated studies that involved examination of teacher commentary, student texts, and, in some cases, retrospective interviews with students and/or teachers about the response-and-revision cycle (e.g., Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hyland, 1998; Lee & Schallert, 2008; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). Survey studies are limited, of course, in that they can only report on what student writers *claim* their teachers did, and interview studies, by necessity, tend to be limited by their relatively small sample size. Nonetheless, survey studies can provide a breadth or range of student opinions, while interview studies can provide depth—more of the “why” of student perceptions.

Most research on student views about teacher response does not closely examine how teacher feedback may influence students’ feelings about writing or about themselves as writers. One exception is in a case

study by Hyland (1998), in which two student writers described losing motivation and confidence over time, in part because the feedback from their teachers reinforced their own sense that they were not improving or making progress. An older experimental study by Gee (1972) made connections between the types of feedback high school students received (positive, neutral, or critical) and their writing improvement; Gee also claimed that the nature of the feedback influenced students’ attitudes toward writing. That said, generally speaking, while we may assume that teacher feedback influences student attitudes about writing, there is not much direct evidence as to how or why it does so.

Further, the previous studies cited focus on younger students, either in secondary school or in their first year of college/university studies. Similar work has not been completed with more advanced college students, who have the benefit of additional experience with college-level writing upon which they can reflect. Though there have been a few studies about how graduate student writers (i.e., master’s or doctoral students) feel about feedback from thesis or dissertation advisers (e.g., de Kleijn, Meijer, Pilot, & Brekelmans, 2014), these focus primarily on specialized, intense one-to-one relationships between mentors and mentees, rather than the more generalized experiences that undergraduate students have with instructors providing feedback to a whole class of writers.

With this existing research base in mind, this paper reports on data from a large survey study ($N = 8,529$) conducted over a recent 5-year period (2012–16) with advanced undergraduate university students. Using both quantitative survey data and qualitative analysis of verbal comments, it connects students’ perceptions of the feedback they have received from teachers to their views about writing in general. It further examines whether salient student subgroup characteristics interact with these student observations about teacher feedback, since there is some evidence that writing instructors respond differently to second-language (L2) students than they do to first-language (L1) writers (Ferris et al., 2011; Matsuda et al., 2013). The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do advanced undergraduate student writers recall and perceive the feedback they have received from previous teachers about their writing?

2. Is there an observable connection between how students describe previous teacher feedback and their current general feelings about writing?
3. Are there any differences among subgroups of student writers within the sample as to (a) how they feel about writing in general and (b) how they characterize feedback received from previous teachers?

Method

The site for the research was a large, public research university in the United States. It is extremely diverse demographically (www.ucdavis.edu) and has a large and rapidly growing international student population as well as a sizable number of domestic multilingual students (i.e., U.S.-educated resident immigrants and/or children of first-generation immigrants). The survey was conducted within the university's writing program, which includes a large upper-division program for advanced undergraduates (junior standing required), offering about 300 courses per academic year. This upper-division program includes a general advanced composition course as well as specialized courses in writing in the disciplines (e.g., biology, history, sociology, engineering) and the professions (e.g., business, law, health). The two most popular and frequently offered courses are advanced composition and business writing.

Survey Design, Administration, and Goals

The survey was designed by the author in late 2011 with input from other program administrators and was piloted then with a group of students who volunteered to complete it. Once the survey had been finalized, data were collected during the first three weeks of every term (excluding summer sessions) for five calendar years (2012–16). Before each term began, the author sent an email with the survey link to all upper-division writing instructors, asking them to share the link with their students in class, via email, and/or on the course website. Instructor participation in the process was voluntary, and student survey responses were anonymous, so it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many classes and students received the link over the years. However, we estimate that, at minimum, at least 25% of the possible student respondents completed the

Table 1
Survey Respondents: Overview

Characteristic	Subcategories/response choices	Number (% total)
Year in school	Senior	6,204 (73%)
	Junior	2,109 (25%)
	Sophomore ^a	129 (1.5%)
	Other	81 (1%)
Major field	Social Science	2,510 (29%)
	Biological Sciences	1,904 (22%)
	Humanities	1,695 (20%)
	Ag/Environmental Science	1,524 (18%)
	Math/Physical Science	843 (10%)
	Engineering	666 (8%)
Specific writing course enrolled in	Advanced Composition	2,792 (33%)
	Business Writing	2,069 (24%)
	Health	1,262 (15%)
When matriculated	All others combined	2,406 (28%)
	As a freshman	5,193 (62%)
Previous university writing courses ^b	As a transfer student	3,148 (38%)
	None	3,342 (40%)
Previous university writing courses ^b	First-year composition	5,491 ^c (56%)
	Basic writing course	1,155 (14%)
	ESL course(s)	166 (2%)
	Other	1,145 (14%)
Language background ^d	English only	3,138 (37.5%)
	English + another language(s)	2,489 (30%)
	A language(s) other than English	2,741 (33%)
Visa status	International student	437 (5%)

^a Although junior standing is an official prerequisite for courses in this program, the prerequisite is not automatically enforced, so a few sophomores slipped into the classes over the years. ^b Totals add up to more than 100% because students were told to select all that applied (e.g., basic writing + first-year composition). ^c First-year composition courses are offered in four departments at this university. This is a combined total. ^d These categories are based on students' responses to survey question 11 (languages spoken in their home when young children).

survey, although that percentage may be as high as 40%. Over five years, more than 8,500 students completed and submitted the survey. Table 1 shows the general characteristics of the survey respondent population.

Survey goals. The primary purpose of the survey was to gather demographic information to (a) better understand the student population in the advanced writing program for internal administrative and instructional purposes and (b) to document changes and growth over time to better advocate for resources from university administrators. A secondary but important goal was to have students self-assess their own writing abilities and reflect upon how previous experiences with writing instruction had contributed (or not) to their current strengths and weaknesses as writers.

The survey instrument. The survey was designed and delivered through the online collector SurveyMonkey. It was a 21-item survey in three sections: (a) Introduction (questions about students' grade level, major, when they had matriculated at the university, etc.); (b) Writing and language background (which college writing course[s] they had already taken, the language[s] spoken in their home, etc.); and (c) Writing Skills (self-assessment of their own writing skills and experiences). The survey consisted of multiple-choice items with room for optional additional comments on most questions.¹ The full text of the survey is provided in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

To investigate the research questions outlined above, the analysis for this paper focuses primarily on student responses to Questions 18 and 19 with other information gathered from the first two sections of the survey to discuss Research Question 3 in particular. The multiple-choice responses to Questions 18 and 19 were examined as frequencies and percentages and cross-tabulated to see connections between the two items and whether there were any statistically significant relationships between reported teacher feedback characteristics and respondents' attitudes about writing.² The verbal comments provided in response to Question

¹ The survey was completely anonymous, and IP addresses were not collected. The study was judged "Ex-empt" from human subjects concerns by the university's institutional research board.

² All statistical calculations (paired samples *t* tests) were performed using SPSS Version 24. Complete statistical results are available from the author upon request.

19 were also categorized and tabulated; a subset of these categorizations was cross-checked for confirmation with two co-researchers. To address Research Question 3, responses to Questions 18 and 19 were also cross-tabulated and statistically compared with students’ self-described language background (based on responses to Question 11) and a question (6) related to their pathways to upper-division writing courses (regarding when they matriculated at the university). The results discussed in the next section are based upon all of these analyses.

Results

Research Question 1: Students’ Memories of Teacher Feedback

Table 2 summarizes students’ responses to survey Question 19, about teacher feedback they had previously received. The general picture presented in Table 2 is that many students recalled receiving generally positive feedback from their teachers (48% chose “Teachers generally liked my writing”), while few remembered their teachers as never seeming “to like anything about my writing” (1.6%). However, when asked about specific feedback they’d received on different aspects of their writing, the responses were more mixed:

- While 45% of students said teachers had praised their content or ideas, 31% said teachers had felt their ideas were unclear and/or underdeveloped.
- Twenty-six percent of the respondents said that teachers had criticized their use of language, but nearly 23% said that teachers had praised their language use.
- Twenty-five percent said instructors had praised their organization, but 20% said teachers had criticized it.

Another 12% of respondents said they couldn’t remember any teacher feedback about their writing. In short, though nearly half of the students reported that teachers had seemed to generally like their writing and very few said that their teachers hadn’t liked anything about their writing, there was quite a mixture of reported student experiences when it came to teacher feedback about specific characteristics of their writing.

Table 2
Student Responses to Survey Question 19

Q19: Have you ever been given any specific feedback by teachers about your strengths or weaknesses as a writer? If so, what kinds of things did they mention? Answer ALL that apply.

Answer Choices		Responses
I sometimes enjoyed writing.	49.17%	4,004
I always or usually enjoyed writing.	24.40%	1,987
I rarely enjoyed writing	21.07%	1,716
I never enjoyed writing	5.35%	436
Total		8,143

Verbal comments. Optional comments were provided on Question 19 by 406 of the respondents. These comments were categorized and collated (see Table 3). Many of the comments were coded for more than one category, so the totals in Table 3 are higher than 406.

Table 3
Optional Verbal Comments from Question 19 (Teacher Feedback)

Category/Theme	Number of responses	Illustrative quotation(s)
Specific negative comment	193 (48%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I've been told I need to work on being concise. • Constant criticism was run-on sentences.
Self-Critical	73 (18%)	I have potential but could get much better.
Strengths + weaknesses	68 (17%)	I once got the comment, and I quote, “Your organization really could be a lot better, but you’re a good enough writer that you get away with it.”
General positive comment	61 (15%)	Teachers really enjoyed my writing and have asked to use my papers as examples.
General negative comment	38 (9%)	They said I have a lot to learn.
Feedback unhelpful	36 (9%)	They often write nice, and great job, but to me it sounds like they never gave me good feedback.
Depends on teacher	34 (8%)	In high school my essay class teacher didn't like my writing and gave me lower grades than I was used to. In college the following year in freshman comp my professor really liked it and I received all As on essays. So I'm not sure how my writing actually is.
Time reference	25 (6%)	The praise stopped right around middle school.
Feedback helpful	17 (4%)	The biggest help I get from teachers is when I struggle with expressing my ideas coherently. I will occasionally phrase my thoughts awkwardly, so teachers will help me clarify these ideas.
Improved over time	17 (4%)	In the past I did have a lot of trouble writing, but over time with more practice, I got better and started getting better feedback.
Background	17 (4%)	I was in Special Education all my life for a learning disability because of my weakness with reading and writing.
Writer preferences	14 (3%)	When I'm writing about a subject I'm interested in, I get better comments than with other assignments.
Can't remember	11 (3%)	I do not remember. It has been several years since I last took a writing course.
Neutral response	7 (2%)	I don't think I was particularly noteworthy nor particularly criticized.

Ferris, D. (2018). “They said I have a lot to learn”: How teacher feedback influences advanced university students' views of writing. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 4(2), 4–33.

As might be expected, nearly half of the comments (48%) described a specific criticism(s) made by their previous teachers about their writing. These comments covered a wide range of possible problems, from spelling and overuse of passive voice, to poor idea development, to weak organization, to lack of analysis. A few students specifically noted that their teachers had said they “write the way they talk” and that this was portrayed as a weakness. The second-largest category, self-critical comments (18% of the total responses), included both some of these specific criticisms plus more general statements about their overall abilities as writers (e.g., “I have potential but I could get much better”; “I’m a lazy writer and my problem comes from a lack of proofreading”; “I have a tendency to rant”).

It is perhaps not surprising that, when asked about their memories of teacher feedback, students might focus on the times their writing received criticism. However, the next two highest categories in Table 2 (“Strengths + Weaknesses” and “General positive comment”) show that at least some students reported receiving encouragement from their past teachers, even if the feedback was paired with criticism (“I would be praised on my ideas but had to work on grammar”), and even if the praise was of a fairly general nature (“One teacher said my voice in my writing was strong, though I still don’t know exactly what that means”). In another 17 instances, comments were coded under a “Feedback helpful” category, meaning that students expressed appreciation for ways in which they felt teacher feedback had facilitated their improvement or at least built their confidence. This finding suggests that, contrary to 1980s-era warnings about the negative influence of teacher feedback, there are at least some teachers who respond to student writing in ways that writers find helpful, encouraging, and motivating. In contrast, several other themes emerged in which students conveyed frustration with their past feedback experiences, either finding teacher feedback unhelpful (9%), remarking that their feedback memories varied depending on the teacher and sometimes on the assignment (8%), and expressed how their own preferences about writing assignments and personal style would clash with the desires or expectations of their teachers (3%).

A final set of categories that emerged from this analysis represented survey respondents’ more personal observations about themselves and their progress. For example, some students (17 comments or 4%) specifically

mentioned their own backgrounds, such as being second-language speakers of English or having struggled with learning disabilities. Students also, in some comments (25/6%), made specific time references (e.g., “in high school” or differences between high school and college instructors), and in some instances (17/4%) noted that while instructors had commented on particular issues in the past, they (respondents) believed that they had improved in that area over time.

Research Question 2: Relationships Between Teacher Feedback and General Writing Attitudes

To address Research Question 2, students’ responses to Questions 18 and 19 were cross-tabulated, and statistical relationships were examined for significance. The results of this analysis are shown in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4
Student Writing Attitudes (Student Responses to Survey Question 18)

Q18: Has writing (especially in school) been a good experience for you?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Teachers generally liked my writing.	47.72%	3,868
Teachers praised my content/ideas.	44.89%	3,638
Teachers felt my ideas were unclear or needed more detail.	30.75%	2,492
Teachers criticized my language use (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, or other mechanics).	26.18%	2,122
Teachers praised my organization.	24.87%	2,016
Teachers praised my expression/language use.	22.67%	1,837
Teachers criticized my organization.	19.79%	1,604
No, not that I can remember.	12.09%	980
Teachers never seemed to like anything about my writing.	1.59%	129
Total		8,105

Question 18 asked students to reflect on their past writing experiences, especially writing for school. Respondents in this survey were generally lukewarm to negative in their reported attitudes toward writing, with 49% saying they “sometimes” enjoyed it, 26% saying they “rarely” or “never”

enjoyed it, and only 24% saying they “always or usually” enjoyed it. One could, however, interpret responses in the opposite direction—nearly 75% of students said they “sometimes” or “always” enjoyed writing.

Table 5
Relationships between Student Writing Attitudes (Q18) and Student Memories of Teacher Feedback (Q19)

Reported teacher feedback (Q19) ^a	Attitude type (Q18)				Total
	Always/ Usually enjoyed writing	Sometimes enjoyed writing	Rarely enjoyed writing	Never enjoyed writing	
Teachers generally liked my writing	1,555 (42%)	1,873 (51%)	355 (10%)	78 (2%)	3,689
Praised my ideas	1,257 (35%)	1,788 (49%)	505 (14%)	83 (2%)	3,639
Praised my organization	727 (36%)	949 (47%)	281 (14%)	54 (3%)	2,017
Praised my language use	901 (48%)	745 (40%)	153 (8%)	36 (2%)	1,858
Criticized my ideas	389 (16%)	1,227 (49%)	687 (28%)	186 (8%)	2,493
Criticized my organization	335 (21%)	755 (47%)	399 (25%)	114 (7%)	1,605
Criticized my language use	318 (15%)	1,024 (48%)	604 (28%)	172 (8%)	2,123
Teachers never seemed to like my writing	7 (5%)	33 (26%)	41 (32%)	48 (37%)	129
Don't remember	89 (9%)	487 (50%)	305 (31%)	98 (10%)	981

^a Respondents could select all statements that they wanted to for Q19

Ferris, D. (2018). “They said I have a lot to learn”: How teacher feedback influences advanced university students’ views of writing. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 4(2), 4–33.

Table 5 shows the cross-tabulated relationships between students’ responses about how much they had or had not enjoyed writing (Question 18) and their memories of teacher feedback (Question 19).

Among the more specific descriptors, students seemed especially sensitive to both positive and negative teacher feedback about language use and expression. If students reported that teachers had praised their language expression, 48% of them also said that they had “always/usually” enjoyed writing (the highest level of enjoyment connected to any specific feedback descriptor), and only 2% said that they “never” did. In contrast, when students said that teachers had criticized their language use, 8% said they had “never” enjoyed writing (the highest “never” percentage connected to any feedback description). This particular finding seems especially salient given the diverse language backgrounds of the respondents. It is not surprising that multilingual students, who are likely well aware of struggles they might have with language for writing, would particularly remember and react strongly to teacher feedback (good or bad) about their language use in writing. This point will be discussed further with regard to Research Question 3 in the next section and in the conclusion. All of the statistical relationships between attitudes toward writing and specific teacher feedback categories were highly significant ($p < .0001$).

Research Question 3: Differences Across Student Subgroups in Teacher Feedback Experiences and Writing Attitudes

To address the third research question, I looked at two specific student characteristics identified in the survey: (a) matriculation history at the university where the study took place and (b) language background. Matriculation history was a binary category with data taken from Question 6 of the survey: Had the respondents begun their studies as freshmen at the 4-year university under investigation, or had they transferred from another institution (in most cases, from a state-funded 2-year or community college)? Since research suggests that transfer students may face greater challenges and lack confidence in their writing abilities (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Pennington, 2006; Wood & Moore, 2014), it seemed worth examining whether their overall enjoyment of writing and their reported experiences with teacher feedback were similar to or different from those

of other student subgroups. Language background groups, as also shown in Table 1, were defined by students' responses to Question 11 (primary language[s] spoken in the home). The results of the subgroup analyses are shown in Tables 6 and 7; again, all statistical tests were significant at the level $p < .0001$.

Table 6

Student Subgroup Variables Cross-Tabulated with Writing Attitude Responses (Q18)

Subgroup	Always/ usually enjoyed writing	Sometimes enjoyed writing	Rarely enjoyed writing	Never enjoyed writing	Totals
Matriculation status					
Began as freshman	1,229 (24.3%)	2,532 (50%)	1,047 (21%)	247 (5%)	5,055
Transfer	753 (25%)	1,430 (47%)	666 (22%)	186 (6%)	3,065
Primary language background ^a					
L1	996 (33%)	1429 (47%)	517 (17%)	111 (4%)	3053
Bilingual	564 (23%)	1250 (51%)	493 (20%)	121 (5%)	2428
L2	427 (16%)	1325 (50%)	706 (27%)	204 (8%)	2662

^a L1 = monolingual English; bilingual = English + another language(s); L2 = a language other than English.

Although the raw data shown in Table 6 suggest that the student respondents' matriculation status (whether they began at the university as freshmen or as transfer students) had little connection to their overall enjoyment of writing in the past, even these small differences were statistically significant, no doubt due to the extremely large N . Further, multilingual students (including both the bilingual group and the L2 group) expressed

much less enjoyment of writing than did students who came from a monolingual English (L1) background. While 33% of the L1 students said they “always or usually” enjoyed writing, only 23% of the bilingual students and 16% of the L2 students selected that response. On the other end of the spectrum, 35% of the L2 students said they “never” or “rarely” enjoyed writing, compared with 25% of the bilingual students and 21% of the L1 students.

Table 7
Student Subgroup Variables Cross-Tabulated with Teacher Feedback Responses (Q19).

Teacher feedback option	Matriculated as freshman	Transfer student	L1	Bilingual (English + another language on Q11)	L2
Generally liked my writing	2,449 (21%)	1,411 (21%)	1,917 (26%)	1,115 (19%)	836 (15%)
Praised ideas	2,341 (20%)	1,288 (19%)	1,505 (21%)	1,085 (19%)	1,048 (19%)
Praised organization	1,296 (11%)	714 (10%)	855 (12%)	597 (10%)	564 (10%)
Praised language	1,153 (10%)	680 (10%)	850 (12%)	558 (10%)	429 (8%)
Criticized ideas	1,648 (14%)	838 (12%)	697 (10%)	882 (15%)	913 (16%)
Criticized organization	1,026 (9%)	574 (8%)	557 (8%)	549 (10%)	498 (9%)
Criticized language	1,260 (11%)	857 (13%)	562 (8%)	638 (11%)	922 (16%)
Generally disliked my writing	69 (1%)	60 (1%)	35 (.5%)	43 (1%)	51 (1%)
Don't remember	559 (5%)	417 (6%)	304 (4%)	288 (5%)	388 (7%)
Total	11,801	6,839	7,282	5,755	5,649

Note. Students could select as many responses as they wanted to, so percentages add up to more than 100%.

Table 7 again shows that students' matriculation status did not lead to notable differences between the two groups in their memories about teacher feedback, as there was no more than a 2% difference for any item (but again, even these small differences turned out to be statistically significant). However, there were some substantial observable differences across the different language background groups: L1 students (26%) were much more likely to say that teachers "generally liked" their writing than were the two multilingual groups (19% for bilingual students and 15% for L2 students). The multilingual groups were more likely to report having received criticism, especially regarding their idea development and their language use. However, the multilingual groups also reported having received praise for their ideas at levels close to those of the L1 students. One could speculate that their past teachers, having pointed out language problems, tried to also give the multilingual students positive feedback about their ideas in order to soften the blow.

Discussion and Conclusions

In the data examined for this paper, advanced undergraduate writing students were asked in survey questions to reflect upon the feedback they had received about their writing from their teachers over the years (which could include primary or secondary teachers, college writing instructors, or instructors across the disciplines). In the resulting analyses, students' memories of and reactions to teacher feedback were examined, these views were then compared with their self-reported sense of enjoyment about writing, and responses from different student subgroups were cross-tabulated and compared statistically.

Students' Views about Teacher Feedback

For the most part, it appeared that these student writers were relatively sanguine about teacher feedback: Nearly half said that teachers had "generally liked" their writing, and fewer than 2% said that their instructors "never seemed to like anything about their writing" (Table 2). However, when 406 verbal comments in response to the teacher feedback question were categorized for themes (Table 3), a broad range of

experiences emerged. Students reported a vast array of critical comments they had received (this category comprised nearly half of all comments), and these comments were not confined entirely to complaints about their grammar or mechanics, though many specific language subtopics were indeed mentioned. Some students (18% of the comments, as shown in Table 3) were quite self-critical in response to this question, implying that for some, they felt that their teachers’ past criticisms were accurate and justified. Some students spoke positively about teacher feedback, saying that it had encouraged and guided them to improvement over time, but others expressed frustration over lack of teacher feedback (or at least any they could recall), vague and unhelpful feedback, and feedback they found overbearing. These reactions are similar to the preferences expressed in Straub’s (1997) study in which students ranked a set of decontextualized teacher comments. Not surprisingly, given the size and diversity of the sample in this study (more than 8,500 responses), participants reported having had varying experiences with teacher feedback over time, and in some cases (8% of the total; see Table 3), they said that their experiences with feedback had differed depending on the teacher. Generally speaking, the respondents in this study appeared to have remembered and (sometimes or often) believed what their teachers told them through feedback about their writing. This finding suggests that, despite teacher frustrations and doubts about whether students attend to their comments (see Ferris, Liu, & Rabie, 2011), teacher feedback does in fact have a great deal of influence on student writers.

The Relationship Between Teacher Feedback and Writing Enjoyment

To investigate a possible relationship between students’ memories of teacher feedback and general attitudes toward writing, student responses to survey questions 18 (enjoyment of writing) and 19 (memories of teacher feedback) were cross-tabulated and compared statistically (Research Question 2 and Tables 4-5). It seemed clear from this analysis that students’ overall enjoyment of writing for school, or lack thereof, could be linked to their previous experiences with teacher feedback. Though there were instances of students saying that they “never enjoyed writing”

even though teachers “generally liked my writing,” and examples of students who said that they “always or usually enjoyed writing” even though “teachers never seemed to like anything about my writing,” these were small numbers, and for the most part, a positive experience with teacher feedback was strongly connected with reported enjoyment of writing—and vice versa.

Differential Treatment for Multilingual Students?

To see whether sizable subgroups of students reported different feelings about writing and/or experiences with teacher feedback, two additional analyses were undertaken (see Research Question 3 and Tables 6–7): one that focused on when students had matriculated at the university (as freshmen or as transfer students) and one that examined students’ primary language background (monolingual English, bilingual English plus another language, or another language [or other languages] spoken in the home). Considering the scope of the study—students could reflect upon and comment about any teacher feedback received any time in the past—it is perhaps not surprising that differences in reported writing attitudes or feedback memories between the two “matriculation” groups, though statistically significant, were small. Whether students came up through the university as freshmen or transferred from elsewhere, they were likely to have a range of experiences, from high school teachers to first-year composition instructors at the university or their pre-transfer institution, to instructors across the disciplines. In this regard, although the transfer students may have faced a range of challenges once they arrived at the 4-year school, they did not necessarily arrive in the advanced writing courses with more negative attitudes about and experiences with writing than did students who began as freshmen at the same school.

However, multilingual students, who included both bilingual and L2 groups, were much more likely to report lack of enjoyment of writing and negative experiences with teacher feedback. This finding is consistent with recent teacher feedback research (Ferris et al., 2011; Matsuda et al., 2013) that suggests that multilingual students receive differential treatment from teachers that may disadvantage them or at least discourage them.

This finding is also supported by a recent study of First Year Composition (FYC) students at the same university, which reported that multilingual students expressed much lower levels of confidence in their writing and language abilities than their monolingual English-speaking peers did (Eckstein & Ferris, 2018). Together with those earlier studies, the findings here suggest that teachers of multilingual writers may need more training and awareness about how they respond to such students and what the effects of those differences, when they occur, might be.

Limitations and Implications

Because the purpose of this study was primarily to understand the advanced writing population in our program, it is not possible to sort out whether it was primarily writing instructors or faculty in the disciplines whose past feedback had either inspired or demoralized the student respondents in this survey. A follow-up study could ask faculty both in writing programs and in the disciplines about their attitudes and approaches toward feedback, perhaps with some analysis of actual feedback samples on student papers, in an effort to further investigate ways in which feedback to student writers could be motivating, helpful, or harmful. More finely tuned case study or interview analyses could also yield more specific insights about what instructors do in giving feedback and how it affects their students' attitudes toward writing.

Writing instructors should be both encouraged and challenged by the findings of this study. It is clear that at least some students claim to value teacher feedback, take it to heart, and try to apply it. It is also clear that students sometimes recall feeling frustrated and discouraged by the feedback they receive (or don't receive) from teachers, and, more importantly, that their experiences with teacher feedback may color their overall attitudes toward and enjoyment of writing. Teachers should reflect upon their own practices and consider ways in which they can be constructive and helpful without disheartening students. Such consideration is especially important when teachers have multilingual students in their classes. Specifically, instructors might want to examine their own feedback with regard to comments about language use and,

more broadly, to ensure that their comments are specific and useful rather than vague and overly general (see Ferris, 2007, for specific suggestions about how teachers can self-evaluate their feedback). In any event, instructors who give feedback to college writers need to take seriously their role in helping to motivate and encourage students through their feedback practices, as this study suggests that what they do has an observable impact on students' reported memories and attitudes about writing.

References

- Berger, J. B., & Malaney, G. D. (2003). Assisting the transition of transfer students from a community college to a university. *NASPA Journal*, 40(4), 1–23.
- Brannon, L., & Knoblauch, C. H. (1982). On students’ rights to their own texts: A model of teacher response. *College Composition and Communication*, 33, 157–166.
- Brice, C. (1995, March). *ESL writers’ reactions to teacher commentary: A case study*. Paper presented at the 30th Annual TESOL Convention, Long Beach, CA (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED394 312).
- Cohen, A. (1987). Student processing of feedback on their compositions. In A. L. Wenden & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning* (pp. 57–69). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Cohen, A., & Cavalcanti, M. (1990). Feedback on written compositions: Teacher and student verbal reports. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom* (pp. 155–177). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- de Kleijn, R. A. M., Meijer, P. C., Pilot, A., & Brekelmans, M. (2014). The relationship between feedback perceptions and the supervisor-student relationship in master’s thesis projects. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 19(4), 336–349.
- Eckstein, G., & Ferris, D. (2018). Comparing L1 and L2 texts and writers in first-year composition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 52, 137-162.
- Enginarlar, H. (1993). Student response to teacher feedback in EFL writing. *System*, 21, 193–204.
- Ferris, D. R. (1995). Student reactions to teacher response in multiple-draft composition classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 33–53.
- Ferris, D. R. (1997). The influence of teacher commentary on student revision. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 315–339.
- Ferris, D.R. (2007). Preparing teachers to respond to student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16(3), 165-193.
- Ferris, D. (2018). “They said I have a lot to learn”: How teacher feedback influences advanced university students’ views of writing. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 4(2), 4–33.

- Ferris, D. R. (2014). Responding to student writing: Teachers' philosophies and practices. *Assessing Writing*, 19, 6–23.
- Ferris, D. R., Brown, J., Liu, H., & Stine, M. E. A. (2011). Responding to L2 students in college writing classes: What teachers say and what they do. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45, 207–234.
- Ferris, D. R., Liu, H., & Rabie, B. (2011). “The job of teaching writing”: Teacher views on responding to student writing. *Writing and Pedagogy*, 3(1), 39–77.
- Gee, T. C. (1972). Students' responses to teacher comments. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 6(2), 212–221.
- Hedgcock, J., & Lefkowitz, N. (1994). Feedback on feedback: Assessing learner Receptivity in second language writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 3, 141–163.
- Hedgcock, J., & Lefkowitz, N. (1996). Some input on input: Two analyses of student response to expert feedback on L2 writing. *Modern Language Journal*, 80, 287–308.
- Hyland, F. (1998). The impact of teacher written feedback on individual writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 7(3), 255–286.
- Hyland, F. (2003). Focus on form: Student engagement with teacher feedback. *System*, 31(2), 217–230.
- Lee, G., & Schallert, D. L. (2008). Meeting in the margins: Effects of the teacher-student relationship on revision process of EFL college students taking a composition course. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17(3), 165–182.
- Lee, I. (2008). Student reactions to teacher feedback in two Hong Kong secondary classrooms. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 17(3), 144–164.
- Leki, I. (1991). The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes. *Foreign Language Annals*, 24, 203–218.
- Macklin, T. (2016). Compassionate writing response: Using dialogic feedback to encourage student voice in the first-year composition
- Ferris, D. (2018). “They said I have a lot to learn”: How teacher feedback influences advanced university students' views of writing. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 4(2), 4–33.

- classroom. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 2(2), 88–105.
- Matsuda, P. K., Saenkhum, T., & Accardi, S. (2013). Writing teachers’ perceptions of the presence and needs of second language writers: An institutional case study. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 22(1), 68–86.
- Montgomery, J. L., & Baker, W. (2007). Teacher-written feedback: Student perceptions, teacher self-assessment, and actual teacher performance. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16, 82–99.
- Pennington, R. (2006). Rethinking grade transfer shock: Examining its importance in the community college transfer process. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 14(1), 13–27.
- Radecki, P., & Swales, J. (1988). ESL student reaction to written comments on their written work. *System*, 16, 355–365.
- Sommers, N. (1982). Responding to student writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 33, 148–156.
- Sperling, M., & Freedman, S. W. (1987). A good girl writes like a good girl: Written responses to student writing. *Written Communication*, 4, 343–369.
- Straub, R. (1997). Students’ reactions to teacher comments: An exploratory study. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 31, 91–119.
- Wood, J. L., & Moore, C. S. (2014). Engaging community college transfer students. In S. J. Quayle & S. R. Harper (Eds.), *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations* (2nd Ed., pp. 271–288). New York: Routledge.

Appendix: Upper-Division Student Survey

Page 1: Survey Introduction

1. In which (calendar) year are you completing this survey? (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)
2. In which quarter are you completing this survey? (fall, winter, spring, summer)
3. Which writing course are you currently taking? (list of courses)
4. Year in school? (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate, not sure)
5. In which college(s) is/are your major(s)? (list of colleges, other, undecided/unsure)

Page 2: Writing and Language Background

6. When did you start at UC Davis? (as a freshman, as a transfer student, as a short-term study abroad student, as a graduate or professional student)
7. Have you taken the advanced writing examination at UC Davis? (yes and I passed it, no, I took it once and did not pass it, I took it twice and did not pass it, not sure)
8. Have you taken any other writing/English language classes at UC Davis? Check ALL that apply. (list of basic writing/ESL courses, list of first-year courses, list of upper-division courses, other, none)
9. Not counting the class you are in right now, when did you take your most recent writing class at (name of university)? (never, last quarter, within the last year, more than a year ago)
10. Have you taken any other writing classes NOT at UC Davis? (yes—please specify, no, not sure)
11. When you were a young child, how many languages were spoken by the adults in your home? (English only, English and one or more other languages, a language(s) other than English)

12. When you were a young child, which languages other than English were spoken in your home? Check ALL that apply. (none other than English, long list of language options)
13. Were you born in the U.S.? (yes, no)
14. Are you an international (visa) student? (no, yes--pursuing undergraduate degree, yes—short-term stay, yes—pursuing a graduate degree)
15. At what age/level did you first attend school in the U.S.? (preschool/ kindergarten, Grades 1-3, Grades 4-6, middle school, high school, adult school, college/university)
16. At what age did you begin learning English? (from birth, 1-3 years old, 4-5 years old, 6-10 years old, 11-17 years old, 18+ years old, not sure)
17. Outside of school, what percentage of the time do you use English? (I speak only English, 76-100%, 51-75%, 26-49%, <25%)

Page 3: Your Writing Skills

18. Has writing (especially in school) been a good experience for you? Add comments if you would like to. (I always or usually enjoyed writing, I sometimes enjoyed writing, I rarely enjoyed writing, I never enjoyed writing)
19. Have you ever been given any specific feedback by teachers about your strengths or weaknesses as a writer? If so, what kinds of things did they mention? Answer ALL that apply.
 - No, not that I can remember.
 - Teachers generally liked my writing.
 - Teachers praised my content/ideas.
 - Teachers praised my organization.
 - Teachers praised my expression/language use.
 - Teachers felt my ideas were unclear or needed more detail.
 - Teachers criticized my organization.
 - Teachers criticized my language use (grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, or other mechanics)
 - Teachers never seemed to like anything about my writing.

20. Now we'd like to ask about specific writing goals and skills you have developed at college. Please complete the table below. For each skill listed, please check how comfortable/ confident you are with your writing ability in that area.

Skill	Very comfortable	Comfortable	Uncomfortable	Not sure/ no opinion
Writing for a specific audience				
Planning and organizing an assigned paper				
Reading challenging academic texts				
Preparing for and taking a timed writing exam				
Choosing a specific research topic				
Conducting research on your topic				
Citing your sources appropriately				
Integrating evidence (i.e., quotations or data from sources) into your writing effectively)				
Avoiding plagiarism				
Working collaboratively on writing tasks				
Using technology to improve writing				
Giving feedback to others on their writing				
Using feedback from others to revise your writing				

Editing your writing to correct errors and improve language use				
Reflecting on your own writing progress				

21. Considering your responses to the previous question, to what extent do you think your previous college writing course(s) helped you to learn or improve those skills? (helped a lot, helped somewhat, did not help at all, not sure/no opinion, not applicable)

Copyrights

© JRW & Authors.

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the Journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Ferris, D. (2018). “They said I have a lot to learn”: How teacher feedback influences advanced university students’ views of writing. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 4(2), 4–33.