Change in Feedback Practices and Its Effect on Students' Essay-writing Skills - an Action Research

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1. Introduction

In Croatia, secondary education is optional and is classified according to the type of school attended: grammar schools and vocational schools. Upon graduating from grammar school, the majority of students take the state school leaving exam (further in text the State Matura exam) and start tertiary education. Vocational school students who have completed a four-year program can either enter the labor market or sit the State Matura exam if they wish to proceed to tertiary education. One of the obligatory subjects within the State Matura exam is foreign language. The English language exam consists of three parts: reading comprehension, language in use, and writing in the form of an argumentative essay (A-level exam) or a reply to a short message (B-level exam).

Many vocational school students in Croatia take the A-level English language exam. For this reason, English teachers at the Secondary School of Economics and Business Administration in Slavonski Brod have decided to introduce essay-writing skills in the first year and develop them further over the remaining three years. Despite the change, several issues emerged as concerns for the teacher/researcher. Firstly, students' essays showed weaknesses in essay-writing skills, particularly in structure, but also in other areas (lexical and grammatical). Secondly, upon correcting students' essays (through indirect feedback) not much improvement was observed over time in terms of accuracy. Finally, after being given a grade (summative assessment), students did not seem to respond to the teacher's encouragement to invest effort or time to re-submit their corrected work. If to the mentioned concerns we add the continued weak results of the students' State Matura exams over the years, which seem to be a reflection of the standstill in terms of student progress and motivation to improve, the need for change was imminent.

Therefore, the teacher/researcher decided to re-examine current feedback practices. This was further justified in light of the newly proposed Framework for Assessment by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (2016) which defines feedback as gathered information used to guide learning and improve learning and teaching within the *assessment for* and *assessment as learning* approaches.

2. Literature review

Feedback as part of assessment is an integral part of the language learning process. In studying developments in the area of foreign language learning and teaching as well as second language acquisition it is evident that the assessment and feedback practices were guided by the approaches and orientations to language learning and teaching. The behaviorist tradition to language learning and teaching advocated assessment practices that reflected strict and systematic correction of errors. According to Frisby (1957, as cited in Beigi & Ketabi, 2015), the approach focused on three processes in language learning, i.e. receiving knowledge from the teacher or the educational materials, fixing it in the memory by repetition, and using it in actual practice until it becomes a personal skill. During the 1960s, Corder (1967, p.168) challenged these views stating that providing the correct form may not always be the only and most effective correction as it "bars the way to the learner testing alternative hypotheses". He also claimed that explicit feedback may prove ineffective as it often leads to too many interruptions by the teacher. In addition, he strongly advocated focusing on language learners' output, adapting teaching to students' needs and studying the errors to see if they have contributed to the students' second language. Language for communication came into focus during the 1970s and speaking without the burden of constantly being corrected was advocated by Chastain (1971, as cited in Beigi & Ketabi, 2015), who emphasized the importance of communication and getting students to speak.

During the 1990s, two opposing views on the effectiveness and usefulness of error correction emerged. Truscott (1996) claimed that error correction, more precisely grammar correction, should be abandoned as research showed it was ineffective and no research showed that it can be helpful and that for practical and theoretical reasons it can be ineffective. The practical reasons refer to "teachers' capacities in providing adequate and consistent feedback, and learners' ability and willingness to use the feedback effectively" (Truscott, 1996). In terms of theory, Truscott (1996) claimed that corrective feedback (further in text CF) will only lead to "a superficial and possibly transient form of knowledge" or 'pseudolearning', following the idea that explicit knowledge will never become implicit. Accordingly, he concluded that learners' interlanguage system is unsusceptible to CF. Finally, Truscott (1996) also claimed that CF has harmful effects in the sense that by making students aware of their errors, CF leads to learner stress and anxiety of making the same errors in future writing. This anxiety could lead learners to avoid the erroneous constructions when

writing a new text, resulting in simplified writing (van Beuningen, 2010). In 1999, Ferris wrote a counter argument on Truscott's views of CF asserting that CF is an important tool for teacher's everyday work and cannot be ruled out hastily. She maintained that feedback can be beneficial in the short-term revision of drafts as her research showed that 73% of grammar-focused teacher comments resulted in successful revisions (1997). Additional research (Ferris, 1999, 2004; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008), established that written feedback/correction of errors can help learners to both improve their drafts and their long-term writing ability. Both authors, Truscott and Ferris, agreed that the research base on error correction in L2 writing was insufficient for drawing conclusions on the usefulness of CF (Ferris, 2004) and called for more research to be conducted.

In analyzing the literature on the topic of feedback, one comes across several strategies which teachers can apply for providing feedback to students' writing and for considering students' response to feedback. According to Ellis and Sheen (2006), the strategies would comprise corrective feedback that is direct, indirect, metalinguistic, focused or unfocused, electronic feedback, and reformulation. In terms of the learners' involvement in the correction process Van Beuningen (2010) distinguishes between direct and indirect feedback. Direct or explicit feedback consists of an indication of the error and the corresponding correct linguistic form (e.g. the wrong word is crossed out and the correct form is given). Indirect CF only indicates that an error has been made. Instead of the teacher providing the target form, it is left to the learner to correct his own errors. Feedback can be indirect or implicit where the error is only marked (circled or underlined) or the number of errors is recorded in the margin. Sometimes coding can be used, i.e. instead of marking every error a dot is placed in the margin reflecting an error which students have to correct themselves (Jones & William, 2008).

With respect to the focus of feedback, Ellis (2006) differentiates between focused and unfocused feedback. Focused feedback implies correcting only some preselected forms (e.g. articles, tenses) whereas unfocused feedback implies the correction of all errors. Recently, there has been a growing interest in feedback referred to as metalinguistic error correction (ML). One type of metalinguistic feedback offers a grammatical rule or added example of correct usage followed by an additional oral explanation (Nagode, Pižorn, & Juriščević, 2014). In another type of ML feedback, the teacher writes codes in the margin (e.g. ww = wrong word; art = article) thus providing some kind of metalinguistic clue as to the nature of the error (Ellis, 2006).

Electronic feedback refers to feedback offered through computer mediated communication. It involves students submitting papers electronically through classroom/learning management systems (e.g., Canvas or Moodle) and teachers providing feedback on student papers electronically. Ene and Upton (2018) inform that computer-mediated feedback can be offered either synchronously (typically through online chats) or asynchronously using email, discussion board messages, or comments/track changes in

Microsoft Word. Such feedback allows the learners to locate the corrections that are most appropriate for their own textual intentions and so encourages student independence.

Lastly, reformulation, or reconstructed sentences (Corder, 1971), involves a native-speaker "rewriting the paper so as to preserve as many of the writers' ideas as possible, while expressing them in his/her own words so as to make the piece sound native-like" (Cohen, 1989 p. 4). The writer then makes a comparison of the original draft and the one reformulated by a native speaker.

In addition to the above-mentioned strategies of feedback to student writing which rely on written feedback, we come across strategies which, along with written feedback, include teacher–student conferences. According to Ferris (2011), if completed thoughtfully, conferences can provide student writers with specific, on-the-spot input about language problems and allow them to ask questions and address points of confusion. In their study, Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) established that a combination of written and conference feedback could improve the accuracy of writings significantly along with helping student writers understand the nature of error and how to correct it.

Along the lines of that conclusion, the action research undertaken aimed to introduce a change in feedback practices which could be described as indirect feedback. The change was also introduced in response to the mentioned Framework (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2016), which suggests a different approach to assessment and feedback practices. The Framework is curriculum-based and aligned with learning outcomes defined by the curriculum. Observing and recording information regarding students' progress and achievement in various areas of learning and at various times throughout the school year is recommended. The document emphasizes complementarity and balance of the *assessment of learning* approach and approaches to assessment known as *assessment for learning* and *assessment as learning*. Feedback to students within the *assessment for learning* and *assessment as learning* approaches does not result in a grade, but in an exchange of information on learning and the results of learning (Cindrić & Pavić, 2017). It is a means of involving students in the learning process by providing information and guidance so that students can plan and manage the next steps in their learning with respect to the set outcomes. One of the ways in which this can be achieved is to offer effective CF that prompts students to reflect on their work.

3. Approach to teaching essay writing prior to action research

One of the learning outcomes in the Croatian secondary schools EFL curriculum in the first grade is students' ability to structure an essay. By grade four, students should develop a wider range of vocabulary and use more complex grammar structures in their essays. According to the Catalogue for the National Secondary School Leaving Examination in English for the school year 2017/2018 (National Centre for External Evaluation of

Education, 2017), a wider range of vocabulary encompasses more advanced collocations, idiomatic expressions, various adverbs, accurately used prefixes and suffixes, a variety of linking words, etc. Complex grammar structures include various comparative and superlative structures (for example, less, least; comparative + and + comparative; the + comparative...), comparison of adverbs, modal verbs (including those used for deduction and speculation), correct use of tenses, active and passive voice, indirect questions, reported speech (statements, questions, commands, requests, suggestions), verb patterns (gerund and infinitive), conditional clauses, relative clauses and adverbial clauses, and phrasal verbs.

In order to achieve the set learning outcome, students engage in writing one essay per term. The essays are formally graded, and the marks affect their final grade. Prior to the essay-writing, students analyze exemplary essays. The criteria according to which their essays are graded in the State Matura exam (task completion, coherence and cohesion, grammar, vocabulary) are also explained. Students' essays are corrected in the form of indirect feedback, i.e. errors are underlined drawing attention to the most frequent errors within the following categories: structure, topic, lexis, and grammar. Error correction and analysis are carried out in cooperation with students. The teacher copies errors on the blackboard and offers the correct form. Students are expected to copy the corrections in their notebooks.

To motivate students to practice their essay-writing skills, they are given the opportunity to re-write the essay and submit it to the teacher for correction. Unfortunately, students rarely undertake such a task. The reason could be that students with lower academic achievement see this as an unattainable challenge. Another reason could be that students lose motivation for correcting language/stylistic errors once their essays have been graded.

Despite the analysis of exemplary essays and detailed error correction, the teacher did not observe progress in students' essay-writing skills over time. Moreover, errors were frequently repeated and motivation to improve was low. Therefore, it was obvious that the error correction practice had to change in order to be more effective. The research in question focused on introducing change into the teacher's error correction and feedback practices with the aim to prompt students to revisit their work, think and reflect about their writing and possibly become more motivated to work on their essay-writing skills.

4. Study

4.1. Study aims

The aim of the action research undertaken was of a broader scope: 1) to gain information regarding students' estimates of their essay-writing skills, their preferences regarding feedback methods for writing tasks and opinions regarding self-assessment and peer-

assessment; 2) to establish students' reception of new feedback practices (ML + conferencing); and 3) to establish whether such an intervention would prompt students to invest more effort in their learning and possibly affect their essay-writing skills.

In order to realize the aims of the research in question, the model of action research was applied providing researchers with perceptions regarding currently used feedback practices to student writing which could contribute to applying more effective feedback aligned with the Framework (2016). Stages of the action research suggested by Sagor (2005) were adhered to in the process, i.e. clarification of the vision (focus); developing a theory of action; implementing action and data collection; reflecting and planning informed action stages.

4.2. Participants

The sample of participants comprised three classes of students (N = 60; 13 males, 47 females) in the final grade of high school within two departments (economics and administration) of the Secondary School of Economics and Business Administration in Slavonski Brod, Croatia. These students had been learning English for 12 years. Throughout the four years in high school, students had been taught by the same teacher and had three English lessons per week.

The number of students participating in different phases of the action research varied as some students were absent. Therefore, the sample of participants who completed the Initial Student Questionnaire (ISQ) was 58. Student Essays, initial and revised versions, were written by 52 and 48 students, respectively. The Student Evaluation of the intervention was completed by 45 students. Prior to the research, written consent was obtained from students. To ensure confidentiality, students used codes instead of names on their essays.

4.3. Instruments and procedure

For accuracy of the research, data was collected from multiple sources (Mills, 2003) and triangulation of data was ensured through the Initial Student Questionnaire (cf. Komadina, 2014), Student Essays (initial and revised versions with feedback and conferencing), and Student Evaluation of the intervention. The Initial Student Questionnaire (further in text ISQ) comprised 15 closed-ended questions grouped into three sections tackling specific information: 1) students' estimate of knowledge of essay structure and preference of feedback practice; 2) motivation and input from the teacher; and 3) students' opinions of self- and peer-assessment. Accordingly, the ISQ served to identify students' problem areas in essay writing, their preferred method of error correction and feedback and their attitudes towards self- and peer- assessment.

Student Essays, initial and revised versions, served as the second research instrument where the intervention in the form of ML feedback and conferencing was applied. Encouraged by the teacher, this time, students had the option to turn in the revised essay for a higher grade (see Vizek-Vidović, Miljković, Rijavec, & Vlahović-Štetić, 2014) which was also corrected and analyzed by the teacher. In a subsequent cycle of the action research the initial and revised essays would be subject to a detailed error analysis to establish whether the intervention had an effect on students' learning.

The third instrument used in the research was the Student Evaluation which was administered once the intervention was completed. The Student Evaluation comprised 13 statements (5-point Likert-type scale where 1 signifies strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree) regarding aspects of the intervention to which students gave opinions and provided estimates of their achievement upon the intervention.

Data from the ISQ and the Student Evaluation were analyzed using the SPSS statistical program relying on the descriptive method of analysis (frequency, percentage, mean).

The action research was conducted over a period of six weeks during the winter semester of the 2017-2018 school year and was set up as follows. The initial phase entailed collecting information through the ISQ. Based on the analysis of these results, the teacher decided on a specific type of feedback for the first essay-writing assignment. In the second phase the research was organized in the following order: 1) essay-writing (week 2); 2) ML feedback and conferencing (week 3); 3) revision and rewriting (weeks 4 and 5); 4) ML feedback (color-coded) and conferencing (week 6). The research was completed with the Student Evaluation of the intervention and their estimate of achievement in the writing assignment.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Students' estimates of knowledge of essay structure, feedback preferences and self- and peer-assessment

A total of 58 students (*n*=58) completed the ISQ. According to the results, 27 (46.6%) students stated having sufficient theoretical knowledge of essay structure, 30 (51.7%) students stated that they could use more practice, and only one student reported having insufficient theoretical knowledge of the essay structure. These responses were further explained when students were asked to estimate knowledge of particular aspects of essay-writing (see Figure 1).
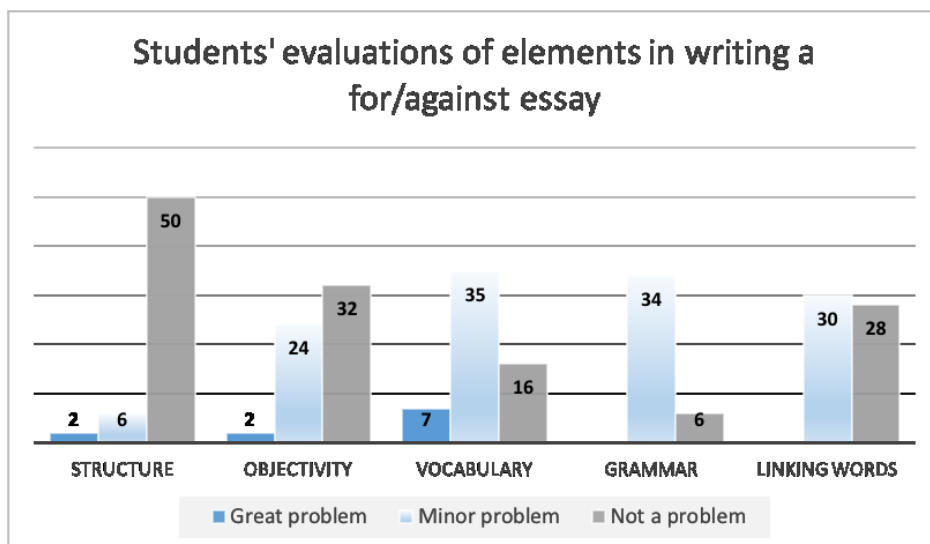
Figure 1 Students' evaluations of their knowledge of elements in writing a for/against essay

According to Figure 1, structure does not seem to be an issue for students. This estimate is in contradiction with their initial estimate of theoretical knowledge of essay structure where more than half of the students reported that they could use more practice. Furthermore, students (24; 41.4%) reported minor problems with expressing objectivity, with vocabulary (35; 60.3%), grammar (34; 58.6%) and linking words (30; 51.7%). It is interesting that grammar presented only a minor problem for the majority of students in the sample. A possible reason could be the teacher's practice of correcting students' grammar errors in speaking only when the errors impede comprehension giving students the impression that they don't make many grammatical errors. Another explanation might be derived from the students' tendency to use very simple grammatical structures in which they are not likely to make errors. Truscott (2004) finds that such a strategy is one of the drawbacks of corrective feedback.
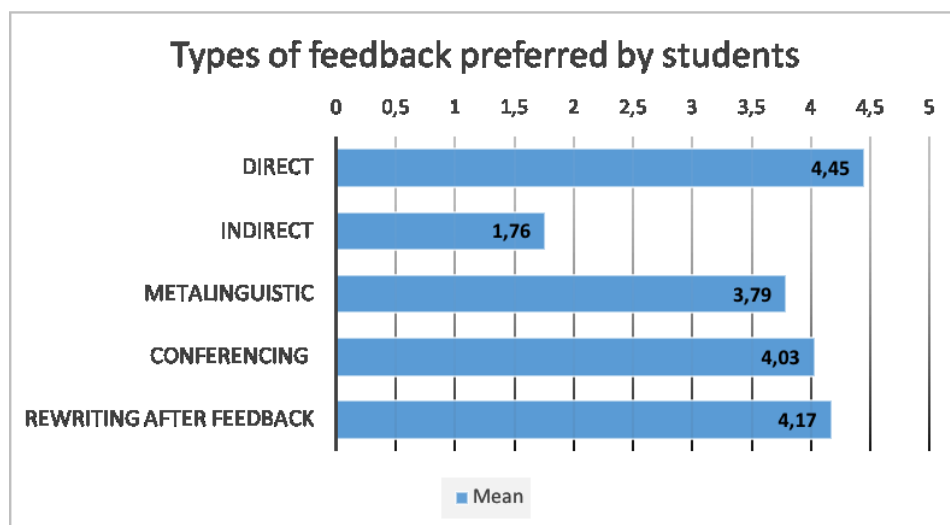

Figure 2 Mean levels for students' preferred type of feedback

On a Likert-type scale (1-least helpful to 5-most helpful), students were asked to rate different types of feedback in terms of how useful they find them for developing writing skills. According to students' ratings (Figure 2), DF with errors marked and corrected was selected as the most helpful (*M*=4.45, *SD*=0.95). Conferencing (*M*=4.03, *SD*=1.04) and rewriting after feedback (*M*=4.17, *SD*=1.09) are also options which students rated as useful. ML feedback did not come across as feedback that would be very useful for students, but neither was it entirely rejected (*M*=3.79, *SD*=1.23). Finally, indirect feedback was reported as the least useful feedback method (*M*=1.76; *SD*=0.96). This result is similar to the results of a research conducted in Slovenia on a sample of 168 grammar school students (see Komadina, 2014) where DF with corrections in combination with teacher's comments was established as the most useful type of feedback. In both research, indirect feedback came across as the least preferable feedback for error correction. Such results do not surprise as indirect feedback requires a high level of motivation and independent work and effort invested (mostly outside the school environment).
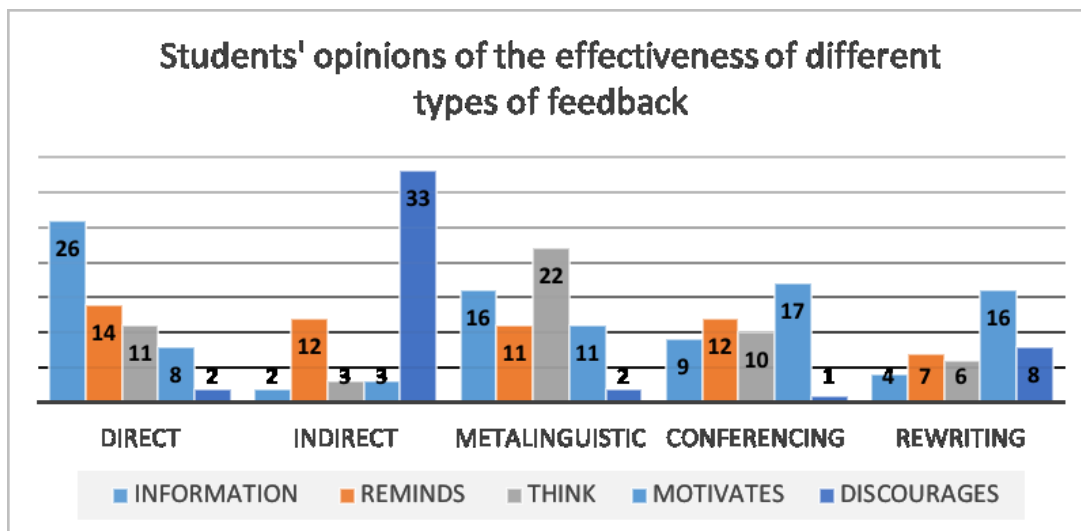

Figure 3 Students' opinions of the areas for which particular feedback types are useful

Students were also asked to specify areas for which different types of feedback are useful. According to the results (Figure 3), 26 students (44.8%) find that DF provides information on their errors and reminds them of their errors (14; 24.1%). Only 11 (19%) students reported that DF actually makes them think about their errors. Two students find it discouraging for further writing. On the other hand, more than half of the students (33; 56.9%) consider indirect feedback discouraging, while some students (12; 20.7%) reported that it reminds them of their errors. ML feedback makes students think about their errors (22; 37.9%), provides information on errors (16; 27.6%), reminds them of their errors (11; 19%). Conferencing and rewriting are considered motivating (17; 29.3%; 16; 27.6%), while 8 (13.8%) students reported that rewriting an essay would be discouraging. In observing the results, it can be concluded that ML feedback would help students think about their errors,

while conferencing and rewriting the essay would be methods that would best help them in error correction and in stimulating their interest in writing. Students recognized the benefit of ML feedback, but of all the methods, conferencing emerged as one that would motivate them to work. These results place themselves along the two currents observed in scientific literature relating to the effectiveness of direct and indirect CF. In our sample, students by far prefer DF. The reason could be that they do not have to invest much effort in correcting their errors, while at the same time they see the extent of their errors. It is claimed that DF enables learners to instantly internalize the correct form in which case the students may find this as effective for learning. Van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken's (2012) research established that direct correction prompted durable grammatical accuracy of a medium size. In that sense, it is possible that upon receiving DF and after correcting their errors students gain a sense of improvement in their writing. With respect to indirect feedback, Bitchener and Knoch (2008, p. 415) claim that through indirect feedback, pupils engage in guided learning and problem solving and, as a result, it promotes the type of reflection that is more likely to foster long-term acquisition. Indirect feedback was considered the least effective feedback and discouraging for our student sample. This could be attributed to students' lack of motivation to independently correct errors which can be attributed to the lack of guidance and reflection in the process itself. Thus, when faced with indirect feedback, it is not surprising that students are "lost" or discouraged. Without guidance and feedback, students don't know whether their hypothesized corrections are indeed accurate (Chandler, 2003). Van Beuningen, De Jong, and Kuiken (2012) found that direct correction was better suited for grammatical errors and indirect for nongrammatical. Along those lines, applying different feedback methods for different purposes may be more effective if we want our students to engage in indirect feedback.

The ISQ also provided information on students' habits regarding their writing skills. The answers showed that 41 students (70.7%) never copy and analyze errors in their notebooks, i.e. that they do not engage in revising and correcting their written work, and yet they almost uniformly state that correcting errors would help them on their State Matura exam (57; 98%). According to Ellis (2004), correcting errors does not necessarily contribute to fostering true accuracy, but CF does promote pseudo-learning, i.e. self-editing and revision skills. This finding implies that students are aware of what could possibly help them but do not seem to know how to go about it. The ability to draft, self-edit, and revise scripts emerged as the missing link in the writing process and yet the allocated writing time (75 minutes) in the State Matura exam accounts for applying the mentioned aspects. Student's low motivation for such tasks could possibly be due to insufficient guidance in the process.

The majority of students (45; 77%) stated that rewriting the essay would help them achieve better results on their State Matura exam. Their estimates of the long-term benefits of revising the essay showed that 32 students (52%) thought it would improve their English, whereas 21 (36.2%) students could not decide and 3 students disagreed. This finding is similar to the results of research which established that revising the essay using a self-

assessment sheet followed by analysis of errors in the class was most useful for improving students' writing skills (see Skube, 2014).

Students' willingness to ask the teacher for clarification of errors revealed hesitation. According to the results, 21 (36.2%) students always ask the teacher for clarification, while 30 (51.7%) students do so only sometimes and 7 (12.1%) reported never asking for clarification. This could be ascribed to the summative nature of feedback as once a paper is graded, most of the students are discouraged to seek explanations and invest time in their learning. The results also show that more opportunities for dialogue should be provided during the writing process. The majority of the students also stated that they like to read the teacher's comments on their essays (52; 89%). This finding is similar to findings by Komadina (2014) who established that grammar school students find teachers' written comments as most motivational and engaging for further work.
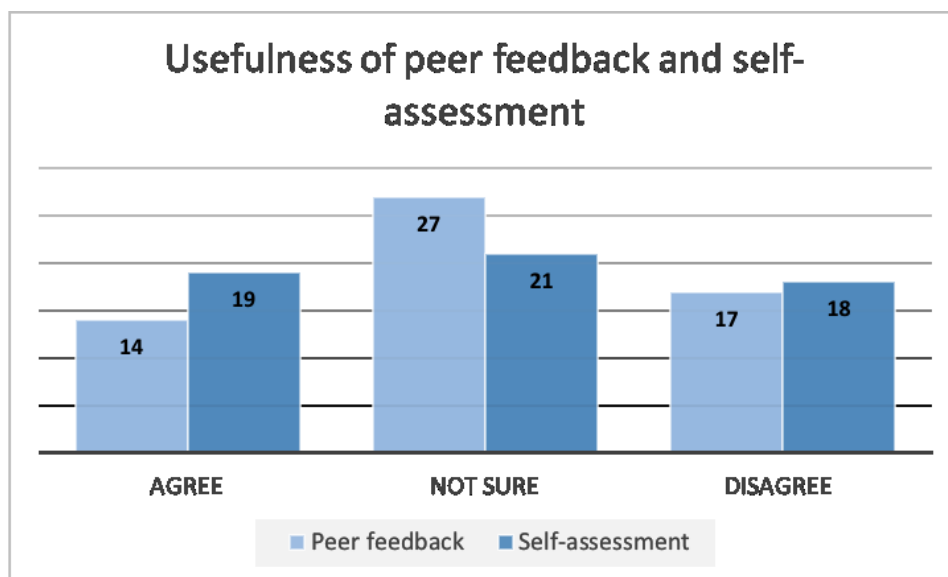

Figure 4 Students' opinions of the usefulness of peer- and self-assessment for improving their writing skills

Finally, students were asked to express their opinion on the effectiveness of peer- and self-assessment. The majority of students (Figure 4) are not sure whether such feedback would be useful. Few students (14; 19) agree that peer- and self-assessment would be effective, but almost the same number of students disagree that such feedback would be effective for their essay-writing skills. Such results show that the purpose of peer- and self-assessment is perhaps not quite clear to students. Students' hesitation and disagreement possibly come as a result of not being engaged in such activities, or if they have, they were not guided and informed. The Framework for Assessment (2016) places emphasis on the *assessment as learning* approach where the student is an active and responsible constituent of learning and assessment. It implies the ability to self-reflect, self-assess, and peer-assess in order to promote independent and self-regulated learning and awareness of one's

learning and progress. According to Skube (2014), students seem to improve their writing if given feedback and the opportunity to self-assess their work through self-assessment sheets during class time.

5.2.   Students' reception of the intervention

Taking into consideration students' opinions and preferences regarding correction and feedback, the intervention comprised ML feedback followed by student-teacher conferencing along with a motivational task which was to rewrite the essay for a higher grade. Upon receiving their essays with ML feedback, student-teacher conferencing took place during regular English lessons. As students had similar types of errors, group feedback was initiated.

Students' reception of the intervention (ML feedback + conferencing; revision and rewriting) can be characterized as successful as 48 students out of 52 submitted the revised essay. The motivation to correct errors, rewrite and turn in the second paper possibly comes from students' awareness of having to sit the State Matura exam and attempt to achieve good results or to aim for a better grade. Students' readiness to conference with the teacher and discuss their concerns was evident and offers support to the statement that supportive, cooperative, equal and active student/teacher relationship contribute to establishing more effective feedback practices (Čačinovič Vogrinčić, 2008). This was also established by Skube (2014) who, from her observations of student progress in writing, concluded that conferencing with the student has the most effect on their achievement. Within this action research the teacher observed that many students were rather anxious to get feedback on the second essay not only because of the grade but also to see whether the invested time and effort was to their benefit.

To monitor their progress, feedback on the revised essay was color-coded (green - corrected errors; red - uncorrected errors; pink - new errors; blue – paraphrase). According to Truscott (2004, 2007), one of the harmful side effects of CF is simplified writing based on the assumption that CF encourages learners to avoid situations in which they make errors. Truscott claimed that the gains found in research relating to CF might be attributable to avoidance and simplified writing. The analysis of students' paraphrases in this research however does not indicate avoidance in the sense of simplification, rather the opposite. Here are some examples of students' error correction through paraphrase:

- "All of <u>this </u>famous people..." - "When you are famous…";
- "<u>At</u> my opinion…" - "From my point of view…";
- "<u>Finally</u> advantage is that they don't have many friends." – "Also, famous people don't have many friends.";
- "...their private life is in <u>dangerous</u>." - "...their private life is threatened."

Paraphrasing is an avoidance strategy (Kleinmann & Kleinmann, 1977; Perkins & Larsen Freeman, 1975) when students are not sure about the correct answer and yet, the solutions they opt for are more complex and appropriate phrases.

5.3. Student evaluation of the intervention and achievement

Upon the intervention, and completion of the assignment, students were asked to evaluate the intervention and assess their achievement for the assignment. The Student Evaluation, as the third research instrument, consisted of 13 statements and was completed by 45 students (*n*=45).
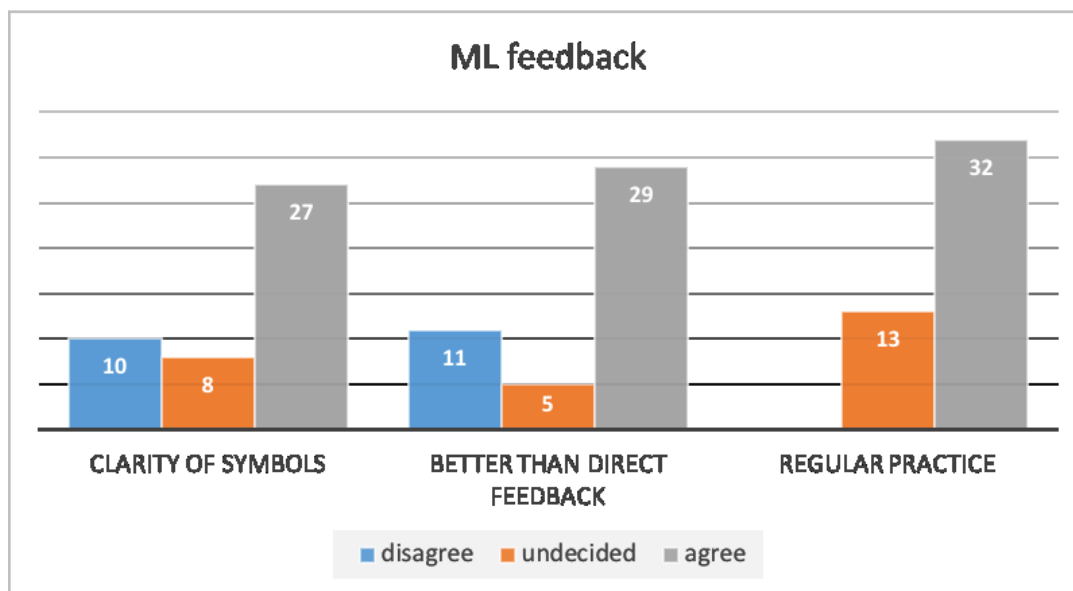

Figure 5 Students' opinions regarding MLF

According to the results in Figure 5, more than half of the students (29; 64%) reported that ML feedback was better than DF and 32 students (71%) stated that such feedback should become regular practice in essay-writing. More than half (27; 60%) reported that the symbols used in the ML feedback were clear. There were some students (10; 22%) who disagreed with the statement, and eight students were undecided. The reason could be that these students did not see the task as relevant since they were going to take the B-level English exam, where their writing task would be greatly simplified, e.g. a reply to a message.
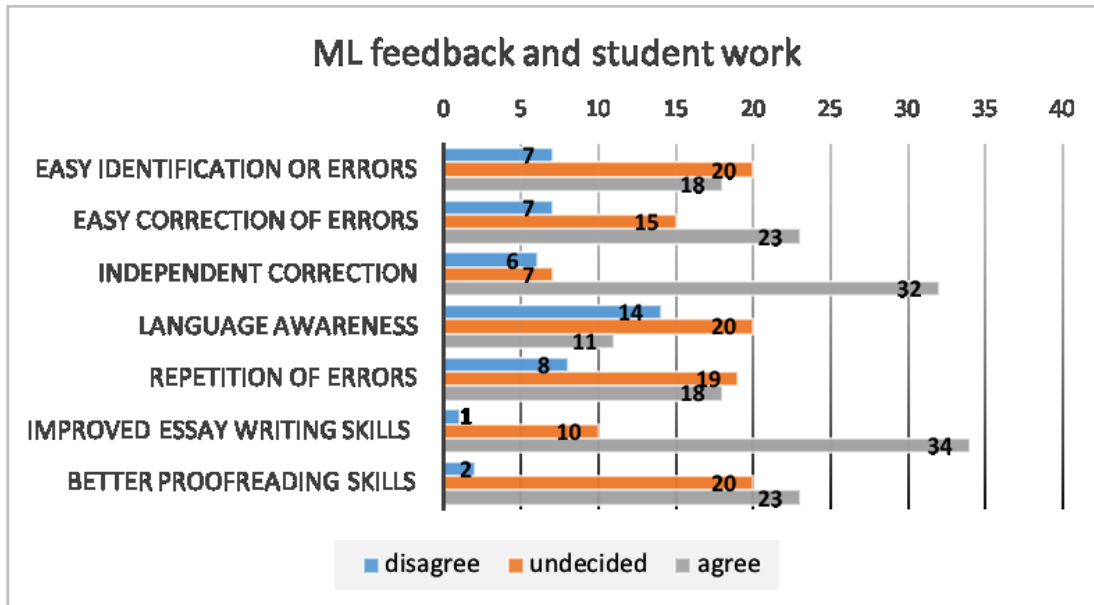
Figure 6 Students' evaluation of performance as a result of changed feedback practice

The Student Evaluation also included students' assessments of their achievement upon the intervention (see Figure 6). According to the results, students were undecided in terms of how easy it was to identify errors (20; 44%), while 18 students (40%) reported that identifying errors was manageable and only 7 students disagreed with that statement. Half of the student sample (23; 51%) stated that they could easily correct their errors, while 15 students (33%) were undecided and again 7 students found this difficult. Considering students' responses, more time should be devoted to explaining symbols and directing students to different sources for information.

Further on, the majority of students (32; 71%) corrected their errors independently. However, in doing so, only a few students (11; 24%) said that they had become more aware of language and the nature of their errors. The others reported not giving their errors much thought (14; 31%) or were undecided (20; 44%). Based on those reports, we can conclude that although students engaged in independent correction, the fact that they did so did not ensure thinking about language. This leads us to Van Beuningen De Jong, and Kuiken's (2012) finding that different feedback methods are effective for different purposes (grammar and style). The majority of the students (34; 75%) are of the opinion that such feedback practices actually helped them improve their essay-writing skills, the remaining undecided. Half of the students (23; 51%) reported having improved their proofreading skills, while twenty students were undecided in that respect.
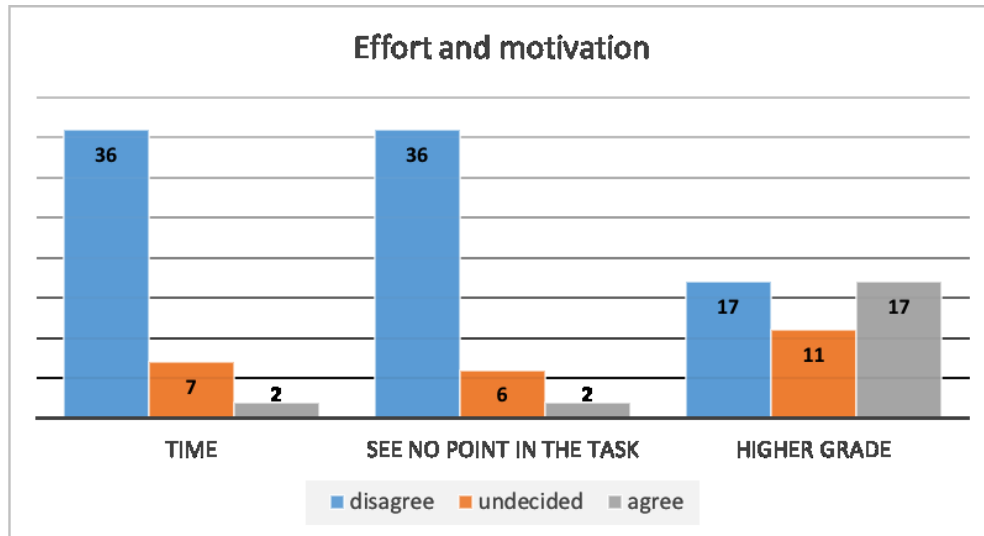
Figure 7 Students' evaluations of the time and effort invested in the task

Based on the results relating to student effort and motivation, presented in Figure 7, the majority (36; 80%) disagreed with the statement that such feedback was time-consuming and the same number of students (36; 80%) found the task meaningful. The number of students who have completed the task only for a higher grade (17; 37%) is the same as those who claim to have done it to improve their skills (17; 37%). Some students (11; 24%) could not decide whether a higher grade was the only motivating factor. The majority of students claimed that revising the essay would contribute to their knowledge of English and help them with the State Matura exam, only seventeen students stating that a higher grade was their only motivation.

6. Conclusion

The defined action research contributed to changing the common practice of error correction and feedback that generally comprised indirect feedback and summative assessment. Such practice did not indicate progress in students' writing skills, nor did it stimulate students to invest more effort in their writing.

According to the students' estimates of knowledge of aspects of essay-writing, more support is needed for structuring essays and less for expressing objectivity, grammar and vocabulary. Although students expressed a strong preference for DF, they were aware that such feedback did not promote reflection and thinking, nor did it stimulate them to improve. Conferencing with the teacher was identified as a method which would motivate students to develop their writing skills. The students were also undecided in determining the value of self- and peer-assessment. The results suggest that more opportunities for peer- and self-assessment with guidance from the teacher should be provided during the writing process.

The intervention comprising ML feedback and conferencing followed by editing and revising proved to be successful. Students found it useful for developing their essay-writing skills, increasing their language awareness and developing their skills in independent error correction. The intervention contributed to establishing a more positive attitude to writing and error correction which was reflected in the students' motivation to revisit their work. Moreover, it enhanced student-teacher rapport.

From the teacher's point of view, the undertaken action research had multiple benefits. Students were more motivated to invest effort in their writing and reflect on their work. Furthermore, it provided for a more relaxed and improved rapport. Students were of the opinion that ML feedback should be made a constant practice. However, for the teacher, correcting the second version of students' essays and color-coding was very time-consuming (about 5 hours per class). Thus, according to the teacher, the time-factor can be reported as a limitation in this type of feedback.

Two findings in this action research surfaced as challenges that need to be attended to in the future. First, areas that have been overlooked in previous feedback practices such as students' reflection skills, i.e. ability to self- and peer-assess their writing, drafting and revision skills were identified as important for students. Therefore, opportunities for such reflection should be provided during the writing process, e.g. in the form of self-assessment sheets or checklists. The second challenge refers to the emergence of new errors in the second, revised essay. To establish whether a change from DF to ML feedback with conferencing actually improved students' writing skills would require an in-depth analysis of students' errors in the first and the revised essays. Such an analysis could contribute to understanding reasons behind paraphrasing strategies, avoidance strategies, and the nature of newly emerged errors. As action research is cyclical by its nature, a comprehensive error analysis would be the next step in the process.

7. References

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