

# Exploring EFL Learners' Response to One-to-one Tutoring Feedback

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This exploratory study aims to find out the response to one-to-one conferencing as so far, there has been no study on feedback from personalised tutoring for EFL doctoral students. It uses a questionnaire to obtain the responses. This survey uses 61 students from all the faculties at the National University of Singapore excluding law and dentistry. The results show that in general, the majority of students found it easy to accept tutor feedback, regardless of whether these were encouraging or critical. They were able to do this because it is all part of the learning process, in particular, on language errors where correction symbols had been given. The results also show that foreign students who were not used to independent learning in their previous universities could attempt to improve their writing skills in research reports by learning to accept tutor feedback and redrafting their ideas for better coherence, fluency and more effective language communication.

## INTRODUCTION

This study sets out to gain insight into EFL postgraduates' response to oral feedback in an English course that has been taught since 1996 at the Centre for English Language Communication, (CELC) National University of Singapore (NUS). This is a writing course for doctoral students from non-English medium universities to help them improve their communication skills in research reports and thesis writing. Since 1996 this module, called ES5002, offers tutorial sessions and one-to-one conferencing between tutor and individual students. Most students at the end of the course had always expressed, in informal settings to their tutors, their satisfaction over this format and style of teaching, saying that it helped them to become more aware of the importance and need for effective written communication in their research reports. However, though they seemed satisfied with the way the course was taught, they did not say much about how they themselves felt about receiving tutor's feedback in an interactional form of tutoring, and how they could improve their writing. It has become important for

the tutors of this English module to find out specifically why the students found this teaching style helpful in their research report writing, what was effective and their general response and attitude, in order to re-think and/or re-design the course curriculum for more effective learning. This proposition concurs with that recommended by Williams and Burden (1997: 96) who explain that it is more helpful to ask, "how can we as teachers assist learners in making sense of their learning in ways that are personal to them?" It has, therefore, become necessary to assess the way ES5002 has been taught over the past six years to see if its teaching can be enhanced for maximum benefits for students.

## **PREVIOUS STUDIES**

There are, so far, no documents on the survey of EFL Chinese postgraduate students on their response and viewpoints on feedback of research report writing. Flowerdew (1999a, 1999b) did a survey of Cantonese-speaking students in Hong Kong and profiled their academic disciplines, confidence in writing in English, common errors in written English, and shows that Cantonese-speaking students felt that they were at a disadvantage in scholarly writing in English. Jacobs, Curtis, Braine and Huang, (1998) carried out a study on Chinese students in Hong Kong and Taiwan on the peer feedback on writing and shows that there was a preference for peer feedback as one type of feedback in second language writing instruction.

Another survey on Chinese students in Hong Kong on written feedback was conducted by Hyland and Hyland (2001). This study focused on a detailed text analysis of written feedback of ESL students and considered the emotional aspects of receiving feedback from two tutors. The feedback was considered in terms of praise, criticism and suggestions, showing that praise was most frequently used to motivate learners while hedging and questioning forms were used to mitigate criticisms and suggestions. However, mitigating strategies could lead to incomprehension and miscommunication. In a similar study, but on non-Chinese students, conducted by Caffarella and Barnett (2000) on doctoral students at the University of Northern Colorado on the importance of giving and receiving critiques, it was found that students considered as important factors in the writing process, the personalised face-to-face feedback and the nature of this feedback for enhancing their

confidence as writers. But their students also expressed that such feedback was highly emotional and at times frustrating on both peer as well as tutor feedback. Despite this, they found that this critique process was one of the most influential elements of the scholarly writing process in terms of both learning about the process and improving their final product.

Previous work by Rudestam and Newton (1992) suggests taking a non-defensive stand when receiving feedback and that negative feedback should be taken with grace. Fiske (1992) and Lamott (1994) hint that critical feedback can have difficult emotional effects for the writers. Nevertheless, Lamott (1994) acknowledges the good effects of feedback, whether negative or positive, in helping improve learning.

Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002) examine how formative assessment plays a role in student learning. The respondents from a UK university seemed to value their tutors' written comments not so much for the purpose of improving grades of their written assignments but because they were personally motivated and valued feedback to better their performance. However, this study did not consider the students' emotional reactions to positive and negative feedback, whether delivered orally or in written comments. Paulus (1999) shows that there were meaning-level changes as a result of teaching and peer feedback than those revisions the respondents made on their own. Overall essay improvement came about as a result of multiple drafts.

Other studies, for instance, by Ding (1998), also focused on feedback on tutor's written comments, not oral. A study on negative feedback and positive evidence in task-based interaction was carried out by Iwashita (2003) but she concentrated on oral communication of L2 learners from primary schools. Her results, however, show that negative feedback is beneficially more effective than the reverse. One other study on interactional feedback by Mackey, Gass and McDonough (2000) also focused on primary school children's response to oral feedback from teachers, as did Burnett (2002) in his survey of elementary school children who reacted more positively when praised about their work. It appears that in any face-to-face feedback, either with adults or children, critiques are effective in helping students to learn and improve.

None of the studies above has used doctorate students from the People's Republic of China. This study of Chinese graduates from the Centre for English Language Communication could yield interesting results since this is the first time that these Chinese students are given instructions in English for the required courses and modules they have to take at this university. It focuses on their responses to oral feedback rather than written feedback from tutors.

The writing course for doctoral students in NUS is not different from others in wanting to help students to improve their writing. Here, at this Centre, we are interested to know how much they value feedback for the sake of overall self-improvement in writing as one-to-one conferencing is a common teaching style used by all CELC tutors in both language proficiency and communication skills classes with EFL and ESL learners. The information from such responses could have implications for ELT specialists who conduct face-to-face tutoring with EFL researchers who are still learning to write effectively and accurately in English.

## **OBJECTIVES OF STUDY**

The general aim of this study was to verify the benefits and effectiveness of the course from the informal feedback by some students. Specifically, it sets out to find out which kind of language errors are most common and which are the most difficult, so that tutoring can focus on the weakest language errors to enhance learning for the students. It is important to do this as tutoring on a one-to-one basis is constrained by time and energy, and it is becoming increasingly more difficult to schedule conferencing time with a larger student population doing this course. Finally, this survey hopes to obtain some information on the attitude, in general, of EFL learners to oral feedback on research report writing. This last objective was added to find out if Chinese graduate students had problems with receiving criticisms on a written language that disadvantages them. This could provide an insight into problems, if any, of individual students who may not always be receptive to criticism, or who may not be able to revise their assignments due to poor comprehension or certain weakness in their written language; this would help tutors to devise teaching strategies that best suit such students. However, it is not the scope of this study to investigate the emotional aspects of receiving criticisms – positive or negative – as it entails a more extensive study.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Course Description

ES5002 is a 7-week course (28 hours) with the first 4 tutorials (8 hours) conducted in the classroom followed by the remaining tutorials of one-to-one conferencing between tutor and student. Each student gets approximately 30 minutes of conferencing once a week, over a period of 5 weeks. They are required, over these 5 conferences, to write either a research paper or Chapter One of their thesis or two thesis chapters, all of which should be unedited. The assessment is continuous (100%) and each assignment merits 20%. First drafts of each written assignment are returned to students before each conferencing so that when students come for the conferencing they would have been able to show the tutors the errors they have corrected themselves. They do this by writing out the corrections in pencil marks. The tutor is therefore able to check which errors are edited correctly and which are not, so that she can spend more time on those that are problematic for the student. At each conferencing tutors give feedback only on the first draft of each assignment and some feedback on the second draft, if necessary. In a 30-minute conferencing, each tutor has her own strategy of teaching; one may start from page one of the student's assignment and work on the language errors, organisational structure, etc until the last page; alternatively, a tutor may focus, on any page, only the more serious language errors such as sentence structure, vocabulary, phrasing and organisation of the assignments, leaving out basic grammar errors. Whichever method each tutor chooses, the main objective is to teach students how to avoid making similar errors in later assignments.

The criteria for assessment are based on the principles of writing conventions taught in the course, using the textbook: *Writing Up Research: Experimental Research Report Writing for Students of English* by Weissberg and Buker (1990). Students are told to identify and mark the principal stages of writing an *Introduction* in their paper or chapter one thesis, using the guidelines in the above textbook. They also have to identify and mark the elements of *Results* and *Discussion* taught in the textbook and write up one *abstract* of their paper or thesis using the same writing conventions taught.

In order not to be “too critical” tutors did not give any marks or grades for each assignment. Instead, oral comments like, “Yes, you have got this right, good”, were given rather than written comments. For unsatisfactory work, tutors may say, for instance, “You seem to have some problems with your sentence structure; let’s see if you can rephrase this.” One reason for not giving lengthy written comments is because EFL students may have reading comprehension problems. My students, for example, (including those from the ES5001 course that I taught) would often ask about the written comments, if any, because they did not understand words like, “substantial, concise, focused,” or phrases like, “discussion too thin, no supporting evidence” and so on. Marks were not given either because of confidentiality. Since ES5002 is a 100% continuous assessment module, these weekly written assignments are considered examination papers, and confidentiality of examination result marks is a policy in this university. However, the tutor’s oral comments are an indication of a satisfactory pass grade or an unsatisfactory one. If it were the latter, the student would be advised to improve the second draft of the assignment, and to produce an acceptable piece of work. They would be helped by the tutor highlighting the errors and identifying the errors using symbols such as *S-V* for subject-agreement errors.

It is acknowledged that this devise of giving criticisms or comments on language writing through means of hedging may not always have the desired results of helping students to improve their writing. It depends very much on the student’s language ability and the way s/he responds to the tutor and feedback. But in general, tutors take a “softly-softly” approach in giving negative feedback because it encourages rather than discourages learning, particularly with students who may have developed a defensive stance about their writing.

### **Student Respondents**

Sixty-one Chinese doctoral students answered a questionnaire at the end of the writing course. They were from all the faculties and research institutes in NUS excluding the law and dentistry faculties. Their average age was 29, and one third of this group was females. All were from non-English medium universities from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). All had read ES5001, the intermediate level English module when they first came to this university though

their language ability may vary depending on whether they had first English lessons in schools or universities. The latter group having a later start would have, in general, weaker language proficiency. All were nearing the final stages of their doctorate programme though they may not have published any journal paper when they enrolled for ES5002. None would have written any research reports in the English language before coming to this university.

### **Survey Method**

The questionnaire method was chosen for a main reason: it has been observed that Chinese graduates do not, as a rule, comment negatively on the English modules they take or the teaching style to their tutors. They may do this in the on-line feedback at the end of the course but they have never, in our teaching experience over the past six years, spoken outright anything critical about course, coursework, assignments, teaching style and so on. It could be postulated that Chinese students are not in the habit of giving oral negative feedback because it is not in their nature to say anything that could embarrass the listeners. For whatever reasons, it was felt that conducting an oral interview on a one-to-one basis may not yield accurate response. Furthermore, observation of students' behaviour by tutors during conferencing in both ES5001 and ES5002 in the past years has shown that EFL graduate students of the same nationality would share their English language problems with their tutors in informal setting only after having passed the English module. They could perhaps be even more truthful about comments on the course if their anonymity was preserved. This is why using a questionnaire would be the most accurate.

Data was collected from a set of questionnaire given to 61 students at the end of the course in the first semester of 2002 and the analysis shown in Table 1. The questions asked are firstly, on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the teaching style in the face-to-face tutoring. Secondly, they are concerned with students' ability to improve their writing and knowledge of English errors. Thirdly, the questions ask about the response of students to criticism in their writing in general.

## Limitations

This is an initial study on gauging EFL Chinese graduates' response to oral feedback in a one-to-one conferencing on research report writing. As such, it is obvious that the findings will be tentative as it cannot consider factors that will make it a more substantial piece of research. Firstly, the sample group was small (61) and did not compare similar data from EFL doctorate students of other nationalities or ESL graduate students. This is because there were few non-Chinese graduates in this university at the time of the survey. Secondly, it did not do a breakdown of responses of respondents from different faculties, the rationale being that PRC graduates have the same level of language proficiency since they were required to read ES5001. Besides, the respondents were all from the science/technology and medical disciplines with none from the Arts and Humanities disciplines as it is rare to find PRC graduates reading Arts subjects in NUS. Finally, it is acknowledged that an analysis of the revised written assignments after the one-to-one conferencing will be useful and beneficial to tutors as it would show the effectiveness, if any, of this style of teaching. For future work, an extension of the above mentioned limitations will be studied to provide a more complete picture of the response to oral feedback of EFL learners in a writing course.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data are grouped into three aspects: general response to one-to-one tutoring, response to critiques and the response to language correction. The results are shown in Table 1. Questions 2, 3, 4, 8 and 9 are given in Appendix 1.

**Table 1. Students' Response to Questionnaire**

	Questions	Very useful	Quite Useful	Useful	Not useful
1	How useful do you find research paper/thesis writing?	25 (41%)	23 (38%)	13 (21%)	
		Strongly agree	Agree	Slightly agree	Do not agree
24	You feel more confident about writing at the end of the course	3 (5%)	50 (82%)	8 (13%)	
		Very easy	Easy	Difficult	Very Difficult
5	You find it easy/difficult to accept your tutor's feedback	14 (23%)	45 (74%)	2 (3%)	



6	If you answered Very Easy/Easy, why?				
7	If you answered Difficult/Very Difficult, why?				
		Strongly agree	Agree	Slightly agree	Do not agree
19	You find difficulty taking criticism from your tutor because you expect her to guide you or tell you the answers	0	5 (8.2%)	17 (28%)	39 (64%)
20	Despite being embarrassed by the errors you feel you have learned to improve	9 (15%)	36 (59%)	13 (21%)	3 (5%)
22	You feel you have learned to accept criticism towards the end of the course	16 (26%)	40 (66%)	4 (7%)	1 (1.6%)
23	You feel that you will be able to receive future criticism from others	21 (34%)	30 (49%)	10 (16%)	0
10	You find it easy to correct the grammar errors if no answers are given		15 (25%)	20 (33%)	25 (42%)
21	You feel stressed out when you have to come for the face-to-face tutoring	1 (1.6%)	5 (8%)	11 (18%)	44 (72%)
11	You feel you have been careless many times about your grammar and could have corrected these yourself	2 (3%)	16 (27%)	25 (42%)	17 (28%)
12	You feel you will learn better if the tutor tells you the answers for incorrect vocabulary/phrasing	3 (5%)	20 (33%)	24 (39%)	14 (23%)
13	Similarly, you can do this also for sentence structures	3 (5%)	31 (51%)	12 (20%)	15 (25%)
14	You feel you will learn better if tutor clarifies your errors on cohesion, sentence structure instead of writing down the answers for you	17 (28%)	34 (56%)	7 (11%)	3 (5%)
15	You feel you will learn better if the tutor gives you cues on how to correct your errors	13 (21%)	38 (62%)	7 (11%)	3 (5%)
16 & 18	You feel it adds value to your paper if you follow the tutor's explanation of the principles of writing conventions	17 (28%)	36 (59%)	7 (11%)	1 (1.6%)
		16 (26%)	37 (61%)	8 (13%)	
17	You feel that tutor has also helped you to think critically	15 (25%)	37 (61%)	9 (15%)	0
25	You think you will learn better if you don't see your tutor face-to-face	1 (1.6%)	4 (7%)	18 (30%)	38 (62%)

## General Response

In general, EFL students found one-to-one conferencing with tutor's oral feedback acceptable. They felt that they had learned better and knew how to improve their research report writing as a whole (Question 1, 24). The answer, though not unexpected, was possibly given as a comparison with ES5001, the intermediate course which is a language proficiency course rather than an ESP course. The respondents seemed to measure the usefulness of ES5002 in contrast to ES5001, in terms of meeting individual needs of students who have varying degrees and forms of language weaknesses. ES5002 was perceived as crucial and useful in relation to written research communication. This is verified in their response to Question 8 (see Appendix 1) where only 3.2% accepted their tutor's instructions to revise because they had to obey, in contrast to 85% who said they did so because they felt it improved the quality of their paper or writing. Those who thought they had to obey the tutor's instructions were possibly more concerned with their English module examination results than worried about incurring a penalty for their performance. It must be noted that foreign graduates who have to read ES5001 and ES5002 could only graduate from NUS with pass grades in the English modules. This conjecture may not be very far off the mark as none of the previous cohort of ES5002 students who failed refused to follow tutor instructions; rather, failure was due to inability to meet the course requirements, such as writing unedited research reports.

Interestingly, a minority (3.2%) thought it a waste of time as they must have considered feedback from their supervisors as the only viable and acceptable feedback and disregarded the importance of good linguistic skills. This is confirmed by Shaw, (1991: 194) whose graduate students' feedback was that, "in China the dissertation is intended for an expert, so not much explanation is necessary." But 30% thought the tutor's feedback was an important part of their learning process. Significantly, most respondents viewed feedback as more important in improving the quality of paper than as a means of enhancing learning. It is likely that EFL research students consider the end-product of their research work in the form of written communication as vital to academic progress and achievement whilst effective language learning is only secondary to such an achievement.

## Response to Language Corrections

This section will look briefly into how English language teaching can be more effective in one-to-one conferencing. EFL postgraduate students were all in favour of the tutor giving some form of guidance in editing their English errors as they found this to be useful and they could learn better (Question 9). They said that written answers were not important; what was important was the tutor's suggestions and explanation given orally. They did not feel they could learn to improve their language skills entirely on their own. In their response to questions on language and organisational errors (Questions 10-18), they agreed they would learn to improve their writing if the tutors clarified their English mistakes. They would prefer it if the tutors, instead of merely underlining or circling the errors, indicated the nature of the errors, for example, *WW* for *wrong word* or *S-V* for *subject-verb* agreement errors. Only a few (3 students) did not think this was a good strategy. Perhaps they thought they would learn even better if they were given no cues at all. This indicates that the minority was willing to take on the challenge of self-editing; however, such students are few and far between as the students who read ES5002 had failed the Diagnostic English Test in their first year and none were supremely confident of producing written work with accurate English.

It is then not surprising that most students were unable to edit these grammar errors (Question 10). Despite their substantial knowledge of English grammar, these Chinese students did not seem to have enough confidence to edit grammar errors. This could be explained by the fact that research report writing is different from expository essays because of, for example, the switch in tenses. Students are confused by the use of *is* or *was* in writing their research objectives. The textbook clearly indicates that the present tense is used in report orientation and the past tense for research orientation. Also, switching tenses such as present and past tense, including the use of modal auxiliaries and tentative verbs when reporting results is confusing. Many thought all explanation of findings should be reported in the past tense, but were not aware that the tense switches when reporting findings that are restricted to the study (past tense) and to findings that are general conditions (present tense).

With vocabulary and phrases they had more difficulty (Question 11 and 12). This is mainly because Chinese students have the habit of translating directly from their mother tongue. Their weakness lies in their inability to use words accurately. Similarly, most students had editing problems with complex sentence structures (Question 13 and 14). They thought that if the tutor explained this clearly and gave them the correct word or sentence structure orally they should be able to edit their paper (Question 15). This shows that students could learn to improve without any spoon-feeding although there was a minority who did not seem to realise that they would not have this dependency on editing once they embark on a post doctorate research.

Besides grammar, students also felt they had gained in learning to improve cohesion and organisational structure of their research reports (Questions 16 -18). A few students (8) were doubtful with the proposition that cohesion and a structured approach in writing a research report are essential in effective communication. It is possible that these EFL students had never considered the importance of cohesion or coherence in their discussion compared to merely reporting on the results of their experiments. It could be their ignorance of the importance of cohesion. They must have also felt that in research reports the sub-headings of using the points system are clear indication that a discussion has ended and a new one has begun. Talking to some students reveals that this conjecture is not wrong.

This survey has shown that most students needed some sort of cues like correction symbols to be able to edit language errors. Save for the more complex sentence structures and vocabulary, EFL postgraduate students were fairly confident about writing the rest of their theses or other research papers. They understood that though accuracy in language errors cannot be achieved overnight they felt they had learned to be more aware of common English errors. Improving sentence structure and vocabulary would be more difficult but students had been taught in this course to write simpler, shorter sentences instead of one long complicated sentence, and this had worked quite effectively with weaker students. However, this finding is tentative as a comparative study of the first and second draft of students' assignments has not been done but will be considered in future work on CELC students.

## Response to Critiques

The response of EFL doctoral students shows that despite their educational background whereby they expected the teachers to feel total commitment in helping students, they had learned to take criticism more readily than had expected. It must be noted that the questionnaire was given at the end of the course and by this time students would have realised that receiving and accepting comments and/or criticism is part and parcel of effective learning and, gradually seemed to realise that learning is not painless. This is shown in their acknowledgement in learning to accept criticism because it is part of the learning process and helping them cope with future criticisms (Questions 22 & 23). This observation concurs with those of Caffarella and Barnett whose students began “to view their writing more objectively, leading to increased confidence in their writing ability as a result of the quality of feedback and the supportive manner in which it was delivered” (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000: 47).

Referring to Questions 6 and 7, the response to tutor feedback/comments shows that students did not feel intimidated in the one-to-one conferencing. They say that it is easy to accept critiques mainly because:

- The instructions are clear. I can follow them easily.
- Because you get feedback not given by supervisors and other people familiar in the field.
- Because the error is not very big.
- The feedback is useful for correcting all the errors.
- Explains me well. Helps to write thesis better.
- Specific, clear and meaningful
- Tutor is quite enthusiastic, careful. Also, it seems she has a lot of experience.
- Tutor’s comments were both straightforward and convincing.
- After revising the structure of chapter becomes more reasonable. It looks nicer and attractable.

The above selected quotes are some of the typical answers, most of which commented on the clarity and usefulness of tutor feedback, which to them, was “convincing”. We can interpret this to mean they were convinced that writing research reports does have writing conventions and that the basic principles taught in the

course are generally acceptable to all disciplines. This also shows that many students were ignorant of these writing conventions since they learned to write a research report by imitating the style of journal publications. That such a feedback was “not given by supervisors and other subject specialists” confirms this ignorance.

Specifically, they found this teaching style useful because tutors adopted a sensitive approach in giving positive comments. This is to encourage learning and positive student behaviour when there is teacher praise, as has been shown by Blöte (1995). All ES5002 tutors have taught ES5001 and it is from this teaching experience that the majority of us have learned to be more aware of the sensitiveness of EFL students to their poor language skills. This is not to say that we would always say kind words to students; rather, it would be hedging instead of a blunt phrase like, “Your grammar is bad/terrible” or, “Are you sure you got the right word?” Such a feedback would have been damaging, particularly with the more mature students from China. These older students tend to be weaker in English as they began to learn English at a much later stage in their lives, usually at university level, compared to their younger peers who would have started if not in the primary school but at high school. From the observation of the behaviour of these students, ES5002 tutors would have learned to develop a more acute sense of the emotionality of students who could take harsher criticisms than those who could not. This is reflected in Question 5 where none of the respondents had stated categorically that they found it very difficult to accept their tutor’s feedback. Only two students said that it was difficult because, “we are in different area, so we need to communicate with each other” (Question 5). S/he thought that the tutor, not being a subject specialist, did not understand the contents of the paper and had therefore penalised her/him. The second student found it difficult to accept tutor’s feedback because s/he did not want to conform to the writing conventions as taught in the textbook; s/he wanted the course objectives to teach students to write specifically for different journals. This student’s perception in fact, echoes those of a few other students who had read ES5002 in the past semesters. They wanted the course tailor-made for their journal publications. Alternatively, they may have the misconception that it is always the teacher’s job and responsibility to guide and give ready-made answers. This attitude may be explained by the kind of supervision and tutoring they were familiar with in their universities in China.

Teachers in China are expected to gain respect from students because of their “full commitment and dedication to teaching, pleasant personality, love of students and self-consciousness of teachers as role models” (Feng, 2003: 14). It is likely then that these students may feel a sense of dejection and disorientation in a learning environment where they are expected to learn independently. Emotional disorientation is not uncommon even among native speakers of English in UK universities (Haggis, 2002), let alone foreign learners of English far away from their homes. Therefore, it is not unexpected to find that a few Chinese students respond negatively to an education system that emphasises independent learning.

The response, as a whole, shows that perhaps a balance of the extremes can be met. It depends on the cohort of students taught in each semester, whether they are more open to criticism and have a more gung-ho attitude towards self-improvement in learning; or, on the other hand, students who are very defensive about their written English and research work. From the many semesters that we have taught ES5002 students, we noticed that the younger students, especially those from the coastal cities of Shanghai or Beijing, seem more receptive to criticism than their older peers. It could be their exposure to more Westernised cultures in their native cities or it could be that they are not very weak in the English language and seem eager to improve their writing in such a short writing course. They must have also felt a keener sense of competitiveness among their peers and therefore taking a few “knocks” would be acceptable if the quality of their writing could improve. However, this observation needs more verification.

The above observation of students who are more open to criticism, ties in with the responses to Questions 19, 20 and also, 22 and 23, which ask if they have learned to accept criticism from their tutors as this is part of the learning process. They disagreed that it was difficult taking criticism from their tutors; neither did they agree that they expected the tutor to guide them or tell them the answers. Similarly, they felt that accepting tutor criticism is all part of the learning process and having experienced this in their English module they would be prepared to receive future criticisms from other academics. Only 10 students (16.3%) had doubts about this. It could be postulated that these few students were not used to the idea of receiving criticism from anyone except their supervisors.

They must have thought that only the subject specialist could do this while ignoring the fact that other subject specialists in similar field of research are equally important in reviewing their research reports or theses.

On the whole, EFL postgraduate students were receptive to the idea of comments and criticism from tutors and that the tutors had helped them to think critically (Question 17). Only one student could not (Question 22). Either s/he did not like criticism in any form and in any modules in NUS, or s/he did not think that criticism in language errors is more important than the research results in research reports. It is likely that many EFL postgraduate students may have the same perceptions. Research results are important in terms of meriting credits in their research projects but students often forget that good communicative skills are equally important in conveying these crucial research findings.

It is interesting to note too that students were quite enthusiastic about one-to-one conferencing. Question 21 asks if they feel stressed coming to the conferencing because they know they have made errors in their research reports. 44 students (72%) answered in the negative while only 6 students (10%) felt the stress. This shows that students were comfortable receiving criticism, possibly because there was no other person besides the tutor listening to this oral interaction; thus, even if a student had produced a poor paper with negative feedback, s/he might have felt contrite but not overtly embarrassed or stressed because only the tutor had this knowledge. However, the 6 students who felt stressed could be students who were either more sensitive to receiving criticism or were already stressed because of other commitments and work pressure, and had little time or energy for their English module assignments. Again, this is only a speculation as the real reason behind students who were stressed was not given by the respondents themselves, but it would not be incorrect to assume the above speculation as previous ES5002 students, especially those who had more demanding schedules and publication requirements from their departments, did mention the stress factor informally to tutors.

In summary, EFL postgraduate students were in favour of one-to-one conferencing, receiving and accepting tutor criticism. They felt they could learn better than in small groups as they were



receiving individual attention. Only 9 students (15%) thought that there were other ways of teaching them to write instead of one-to-one conferencing (Question 28). These few suggested that feedback could be given via e-mail attachments especially if assignments did not have a lot of errors. This suggestion will be considered as it should save time and energy for the better writers, thus freeing tutors to attend to weaker students. In addition, a few recommended that assignments with few errors could be collected by students who should learn to correct these themselves instead of keeping their appointment for the face-to-face tutoring. Again, this suggestion will be considered in future semesters when student numbers increase.

## CONCLUSION

This study which sets to find out the response of EFL postgraduate students to one-to-one conferencing has shown that these students could receive and accept criticism well. They were in favour of this teaching style despite being shown to be weak in research report writing, but they felt that such feedback could enhance independent learning. Most students learning to improve their communicative skills in English would find this kind of tutoring useful because it caters to individual attention and needs but EFL postgraduate students found this teaching style even more beneficial because they were being helped to better their research report writing that is crucial to their graduation and publication accolades.

Not all students were favourably responsive; a minority seemed to feel that feedback and tutoring should be geared towards writing specifically for journal publication. But since half of the assignments were on thesis writing most students preferred that feedback be as relevant and acceptable to thesis examiners. Also, it appears that even if the majority of the students liked this teaching style there were a few who did not, and therefore would not find learning interesting or motivating. These could be students who would perhaps prefer to work independently as long as there was some written guidance that saved them the necessity of conferencing with the tutor. Thus it will be necessary to have a rethink of how ES5002 can benefit all students without compromising its objectives. One of the ways of doing this is that tutors can be more alert to students who have difficulty in writing and or have attitude problem; they can adopt a more concerned

approach with positive feedback or handling students who are sensitive about their poor language skills. This should help students to be more receptive and understanding towards criticism or negative comments (Blote, 1995). This view is also held by Caffarella & Barnett (2000) who say that “it is important to acknowledge students’ emotions, both good and bad, as legitimate and healthy reactions since they are developing the skills needed to become successful writers” (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000: 49).

In conclusion, this study has gained some insight into the response and/attitude of EFL postgraduate students towards criticism in a writing course. Firstly, the one-to-one conferencing will continue to be factored and scheduled into this English module on thesis writing, regardless of the increase in student population. Some quality of teaching will be lost when student numbers are up, such as reducing the number of assignments and other class activities including teaching less important topics, but tutoring in this manner will be the priority of language teaching in this Centre. Secondly, in its goal to help students learn independently, corrections symbols will be used, supplemented by oral feedback on the more difficult aspects of written communication such as vocabulary and sentence structure. Thirdly, tutoring on a one-to-one basis will take into consideration the mixed language ability of students and their personalities and response to oral feedback. It is hard to say if a more sensitive approach to teaching the weaker students will be more effective as it is difficult to read the minds (and body language) of students but ES5002 tutors can now learn to adopt an approach that best suits their students.

The findings from this study are tentative but they may be relevant to teachers of ESL and EFL students in adopting different teaching strategies to maximise learning for students. More extensive investigations such as data on personalities, age, gender and the culture of foreign graduates in NUS as well as comparison of the first draft and second draft of their written assignments to find out the effectiveness of teaching, will be needed in specifying the kind of response that could enhance learning and teaching even further.

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## Appendix 1. ES5002(A) Questionnaire

2. Before you did this course did you know how to write your research paper/thesis chapter?

- A. Yes      B. I was not very sure      C. Not much      D. Not at all

3. Which section of the paper/thesis chapter did you find easiest to write? You may tick more than one.

- A. Abstract
- B. Introduction
- C. Results
- D. Discussion, especially the comments
- E. Concluding paragraph.

4. Which section did you find the most difficult? You may tick more than one.

- A. Abstract
- B. Introduction
- C. Results
- D. Discussion
- E. Concluding paragraph.

8. Do you, in general, accept your tutor's instructions to revise because:

- A. you feel you have to obey
  - B. you think it does improve the quality of your paper or writing
  - C. you feel it's a waste of time but you do it anyway because you are being assessed.
  - D. You feel the tutor's feedback is an important part of your learning process
- (you may tick more than one)

9. Do you feel that you can learn better if the tutor does not write the answers in your work, for example, correct your tense, vocabulary, grammar, etc.

- A. Yes,  
Why? .....
- B. No,  
Why? .....