THE IMPACT OF FEEDFORWARD STRATEGY ON ESSAY WRITING SKILLS OF ENGLISH-MAJORED STUDENTS AT DONG NAI TECHNOLOGY UNIVERSITY

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Abstract - This study explores the impact of the feedforward strategy on the enhancement of essay writing abilities. In contrast to conventional feedback correcting mistakes, feedforward emphasises the importance of offering constructive suggestions and guidance prior to or during the writing process. Limited information exists regarding the application of feedforward as a strategy that facilitates enhanced performance. This investigation employed an action research framework utilising a mixed-method approach to assess the influence of feedforward on the writing performance of English-majored students in writing IELTS Task 2 essays. Students who received feedforward support demonstrated notably enhanced writing quality. Insights from the semi-structured interviews revealed that participants held favourable views regarding the use of feedforward as a formative strategy. The findings indicate that the integration of feedforward techniques can significantly improve learners' academic writing abilities while also fostering increased motivation and confidence in their writing endeavours.

Key words - Essay writing; feedback; feedforward

1. Introduction

Academic writing is an essential skill for English learners, especially at the tertiary level, where the capacity to create coherent, well-structured, and logically sound essays is crucial for achieving academic success. Moreover, Hyland [1] asserts that one cannot overlook the significance of essays, commercial letters, emails, reports, and meeting minutes in today's academic and business environments. Writing, while crucial, has been identified as a particularly challenging skill for learners of a second or foreign language. Brown [2] indicates that this issue arises because L2 learners must focus on several principles to effectively design and develop a suitable writing product. This concern is similarly applicable to students majoring in English at Dong Nai Technology University (DNTU). The anticipated learning outcomes of the Graduation Program at DNTU necessitate that graduates attain an overall proficiency level of 6.5 in IELTS. The students indicated a perceived discrepancy between their existing knowledge and the knowledge level expected, particularly in writing skills. During the instruction of the writing skills module, the teacher researchers noted that the quality of student essays exhibited numerous limitations. The issues observed encompass students failing to meet the content requirements of the topic, neglecting key ideas, straying into unrelated areas, presenting unclear or incoherent content, incorporating irrelevant points, making grammatical errors, repeating information, and some students not finishing their essays. Observations indicate that students encounter difficulties when tasked with composing academic essays. Evidence from the literature highlights various techniques that can enhance students' academic writing skills. The application of feedback provision techniques is included [3]. Conventional feedback systems may fall short in tackling these issues, as they continue to be perceived as a one-way communication from teachers to learners [4]. This limitation prompted educators to create the concept of feedforward.

Recently, the concept of feedforward has been increasingly recognised in the ESL/EFL education sector, with significant emphasis on its transformative effects. This approach is viewed as a means to enhance student learning and foster their motivation to excel, thanks to its progressive guidance [5]. While both feedback and feedforward enhance the learning journey and boost outcomes, feedforward stands out by guiding students towards specific areas needing enhancement and offering practical recommendations for future assignments [6]. In this study, feedforward was used as a teaching strategy to support students during the writing process, rather than only giving feedback after the work was done. This approach was chosen because it gives students clear guidance on how to improve their writing before they submit their final version. Compared to traditional feedback, feedforward helps students feel more confident and better prepared, especially when writing essays in English. The experimental group included 40 English-majored students, who were selected because they were taking a writing-focused course. This number of participants was manageable for classroom teaching and observation, while still large enough to provide useful data for comparison. Since these students are expected to develop strong academic writing skills, they were considered a suitable group to explore how feedforward can support essay writing.

This investigation seeks to address the subsequent enquiries:

(1) What is the effect of feedforward on students' academic writing performance?

(2) What are students' perceptions on the effect of feedforward strategies in academic writing instruction?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework of Feedforward

The foundational concepts of feedforward are based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory [7], highlighting the significance of social interaction and guided participation in cognitive growth. Feedforward corresponds with the idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), wherein learners reach elevated performance levels through directed guidance [8]. In this context, educators serve as facilitators, offering proactive support that empowers learners to connect their existing skills with future possibilities. Moreover, constructivist theories of learning advocate for the implementation of feedforward, emphasising the significance of active knowledge creation and the essential role of formative dialogue [9]. Feedforward functions not just as a means of conveying corrective information but as an interactive process that aids students in internalising genre conventions, organisational structures, and evaluative criteria associated [10].

The idea of feedforward in educational settings has become increasingly important as a forward-thinking strategy to improve student learning, especially in writing instruction [10]. In contrast to conventional feedback that assesses previous performance, feedforward prioritises offering guidance and strategies aimed at enhancing future tasks, thus cultivating a proactive learning atmosphere [10]. The proposal suggests that integrating feedforward with regular feedback can create a supportive environment for growth, helping students understand and apply feedback in their future work. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, particularly regarding high-stakes assessments such as the IELTS Academic Writing Task 2, feedforward plays an essential role in supporting learners' growth. Providing focused and constructive feedback prior to students undertaking writing assignments allows educators to tackle particular aspects like argumentation, coherence, lexical resource, and grammatical precision [11]. Lee [12] emphasises that accurate and practical feedforward can greatly enhance the writing skills of ESL learners as they progress.

2.2. Empirical Evidence on Feedforward's Effectiveness

A number of studies were carried out to examine the impact of feedforward on student performance [10, 11, 13]. Empirical studies have consistently shown that feedforward effectively enhances writing skills. A study conducted by Baroudi et al. [10] involving pre-service teachers demonstrated that the implementation of feedforward strategies resulted in notable enhancements in academic writing and critical thinking abilities. The gains were attributed to the constructive and future-oriented nature of feedforward, which motivated students to apply the guidance provided to their subsequent assignments. Additionally, research by Saeed and Mohamedali [13] indicates that feedforward strategies enable students to enhance their overall effort during summative assessments, leading to improvements in performance, engagement, and retention. Yu and Liu [14] developed a framework grounded in evidence to provide constructive feedback aimed at enhancing students' academic writing abilities.

This framework relies on the support that educators and peers offer to learners at technical, social-interactive, and individual levels. This presents essential insights for students to comprehend and apply feedback effectively to improve their academic writing skills.

Zarrinabadi and Rezazadeh [11] discovered that the integration of feedback and feedforward strategies led to enhanced writing motivation and self-efficacy in EFL learners. The research highlighted the significance of offering students explicit guidance for future enhancement, which subsequently increased their confidence and alleviated anxiety associated with writing assignments. Additionally, Xu's [15] study examined learners' perceptions of this, revealing that feedforward is positively regarded by Chinese EFL students due to the clarity and encouragement it provides. The findings collectively highlight the effectiveness of feedforward as a significant instrument for fostering continuous improvement and cultivating a positive atmosphere in learning environments.

While the current literature acknowledges the pedagogical value of feedforward strategies in enhancing writing performance [10], most empirical investigations have been conducted in Western contexts, with minimal attention to Asian. Notably, Vietnamese students often encounter challenges in academic essay writing due to limited exposure to formative feedback practices and teacher-dominated classroom dynamics [16]. These attributes suggest that students may rarely receive timely, process-oriented feedback that promotes self-regulation and written fluency, highlighting a clear gap in the Vietnamese context. Integrating feedforward into instructional practices allows educators to enhance learners' motivation and performance in academic writing tasks, ultimately leading to improved outcomes in high-stakes assessments such as the IELTS. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the effectiveness of feedforward strategies in improving essay writing skills among English majors at DNTU. Although the sample may not generalize to all Vietnamese learners, it provides important contextual insights into how feedforward strategies operate within formal academic writing programs, offering a foundation for broader investigation. The results of this study may offer significant insights into the relevance of feedforward within the Vietnamese EFL context and guide instructional practices at the university level.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This investigation utilised a mixed-methods action research approach to thoroughly examine the issue and determine viable solutions [17]. This study design concentrates on a particular context (i.e., enhancing academic writing abilities among English majors) and tailored approaches (i.e., implementing feedforward). Educators engaged in action research are thought to enhance the quality of instruction and learning within their classrooms, primarily by scrutinising their teaching methods and identifying solutions to challenges in education. Consequently, the educators employed a pre- and post-test methodology to gather quantitative data, alongside a semi-structured interview to obtain qualitative insights, in order to

examine the impact of utilising feedback as feedforward on enhancing students' academic writing skills.

3.2. Participants

English juniors were chosen through a convenience sampling approach. The primary reason for selecting the participants was their availability to the team conducting the study. The Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT) was administered to ensure uniformity among the participants by selecting those whose scores fell within the intermediate group. Subsequently, the participants were randomly assigned to two groups: the experimental group (n = 40) and the control group (n = 38).

3.3. Data collection tools

The researchers employed various instruments to gather the necessary data. The initial tool utilised was The Quick Oxford Placement Test (QOPT). This adaptive test consists of 60 multiple-choice questions designed to evaluate learners' English proficiency in listening, reading, and grammar. The objective was to establish an efficient and dependable approach for conducting placement assessments.

The second instrument comprised two academic writing assessments, designated as the pretest and posttest. Both followed the IELTS Writing Task 2 format and were intended to assess students' essay writing performance in an academic context. The prompts were selected from authentic IELTS preparation materials published by Cambridge University Press to ensure content validity and familiarity with international testing standards. To maintain consistency in cognitive demand and language complexity, the two tasks were carefully matched in terms of topic familiarity, lexical difficulty, and argumentative structure. In terms of a pilot study, the tasks were reviewed by two experienced lecturers in English language teaching, who confirmed their appropriateness for the target student population. Based on their expert judgement, the writing prompts were deemed suitable for learners at the B1–B2 proficiency level of the CEFR, which aligns with the English proficiency of the participating third-year students.

Each writing task was assessed using the official IELTS Writing Task 2 rubric, which evaluates four criteria: Task Response, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy. Each criterion was scored on a scale from 1 to 9, following the IELTS band descriptors [18]. The overall writing score was calculated as the average of the four component scores. Therefore, the minimum possible score per criterion was 1.0, and the maximum was 9.0. The study involved the recruitment of two highly experienced IELTS examiners to conduct the writing assessments.

The final instrument employed was a semi-structured interview, designed with questions formulated by the researchers to gather participants' insights regarding the utilisation of feedforward. The interview serves as a crucial research tool in qualitative studies, enabling the exploration of participants' opinions and perspectives regarding the phenomenon being investigated, which is not directly observable [19].

The interview protocol comprised open-ended questions focusing on students' affective responses, strategic planning, and perceptions of instructional effectiveness. Questions were developed to align with the intended outcomes of the feedforward intervention and allowed for reflective and elaborative responses. Main questions included: "In what ways did the feedforward instruction (e.g., success criteria, model texts, and planning guidance) influence your preparation before writing?", "Do you feel that the feedforward approach affected your confidence or motivation in any way? If so, how?", "Can you describe how the teacher's comments or guidance helped you improve your writing in later essays?", "How did knowing the evaluation criteria (e.g., IELTS band descriptors) before writing affect the way you approached the task?".

3.4. Data collection procedure

Data collection involved a series of methodical steps. The QOPT was administered initially to standardise the participants. Participants were selected and randomly assigned to two groups: the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG). In the second stage, a pretest was conducted to assess the participants' writing ability before the treatment. The treatments were administered weekly during the third stage.

The experimental class was organised systematically according to principles of sociocultural learning theory by Vygotsky, and the feedforward model proposed by Hattie and Timperley [20]. This study examines the influence of feedforward on the academic writing skills of English-majored students through proactive and forward-looking guidance. The course comprised 120-minute sessions conducted over a duration of fifteen weeks, incorporating explicit instruction, modelling, collaborative writing, and scaffolded practice. Finally, rather than solely addressing students' mistakes through feedback, the researchers emphasised providing clear, constructive guidance for future improvement, known as feedforward. This summary outlines the feedforward prompts utilised by the researcher-teacher in the experimental class, as presented in Table 1.

Although the control group (CG) received instruction from the same teacher and comparable topics selected from IELTS Writing Task 2 materials to eliminate instructor-related bias, the CG followed a more traditional feedback-based approach. Students were introduced to the writing prompt with brief instructions but without structured pre-task support. They wrote essays based on the topic, and feedback was delivered after task completion, primarily in the form of corrective comments on language, structure, or coherence. No success criteria or models were provided in advance, and the feedback served to highlight deficiencies in the completed text rather than to prepare students for future tasks.

In the fourth stage, a posttest was conducted to assess the participants' writing performance following the instruction. In the final stage, the researchers invited five participants from the experimental group to articulate their perceptions regarding the application of feedforward. The participants were convened in a university classroom for this purpose. Following a cordial introduction, the researchers prompted the participants to discuss their

perceptions and experiences related to the experiment. The researchers posed questions and provided additional prompts alongside the participants' responses to address all dimensions of the topic. The conversations were meticulously documented for subsequent analysis.

Table 1. Summary of Feedforward Prompts Used in Class

Stage	Description	Feedforward Prompts
Planning	We guide students to think ahead - how to build a good essay from the start.	"Before you write, ask yourself: Does my plan answer the question? Are my ideas clear and specific? Will my examples support my argument?"
Writing	While students write, the researchers encourage them to pause and reflect	"As you write your body paragraph, make sure each idea is fully developed. Try using this pattern: Topic sentence → Explanation → Example. Is your example realistic and relevant?"
Reviewing	Instead of just correcting mistakes, the researchers highlight what can be done better next time. Example of a Student's Paragraph (simplified): Some people think children should not work. I think they can work a little. It helps them. For example, a part-time job.	"Next time, try to explain how a part-time job helps children. For instance, you could say: 'Working a few hours a week teaches teenagers responsibility and time management, which are useful for their future careers.' This gives the reader a clear picture."

3.5. Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected data, which included both quantitative and qualitative elements, was conducted in two distinct phases. In the initial phase, the quantitative data underwent analysis utilising SPSS version 22. In addition to the calculations of central tendency and variability for all the measures mentioned, a sample t-test was conducted to assess the differences in gain scores between the two groups across the two tests. During the second phase, the qualitative data underwent analysis using a content analysis approach. Content analysis serves as a thorough and methodical examination of the observable elements of communication, aimed at uncovering patterns or themes. The researchers implemented a systematic approach to content analysis, which comprised three distinct phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding [19]. During the open coding phase, the transcripts were thoroughly examined to ensure the researchers could derive meaningful insights from them. The axial coding phase involved the extraction and validation of the primary themes. The selective coding concentrated on analysing the participants' perceptions within the context of the inductively generated themes. A copy of the final findings was provided to three interviewees to verify whether it accurately reflected their intended meanings. The findings were confirmed to accurately reflect their intended meanings.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. The impact of feedforward on participants' essay writing performance

The descriptive statistics below present the mean scores (M), standard deviations (SD), and standard error means (SEM) for both the control group (CG) and experimental group (EG) in the pre-test and post-test. These scores were used to evaluate students' writing performance before and after the feedforward intervention.

In terms of overall writing, the median pre-test scores for both groups were nearly the same. The mean pre-test score was 4. 18 in the CG and 4. 50 in the EG. Following the intervention, the difference in post-test scores was noticeable. The mean post-test score slightly increased to 4. 67 in the CG, while sharply increased to 5.51 in the EG. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for pre-and post-tests scores

		Pre-test			Post- test		
	Group	M	SD	Std. Error Mean	M	SD	Std. Error Mean
Overall writing	CG	4.18	1.46	0.23	4.67	1.39	0.22
	EG	4.50	1.38	0.21	5.51	1.46	0.23

4.1.1. Within-group comparisons (Paired-samples t-test)

There was a statistically significant improvement in writing scores from the pre-test to the post-test for the control group. Although the mean improvement was moderate (-0.487), the result was statistically significant at the 0.01 level, suggesting that even traditional instruction led to measurable progress in students' writing abilities.

The experimental group also showed a statistically significant increase in writing scores after the feedforward-based intervention. The mean difference (-1.010) was notably larger than that of the control group, and the result was highly significant ($p < .001$). This indicates a stronger effect of the feedforward strategy on improving students' essay writing performance.

Both groups experienced statistically significant gains in their writing performance over time. However, the experimental group showed a greater improvement, both in terms of mean gain and statistical significance, highlighting the effectiveness of the feedforward approach in enhancing students' academic writing skills. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Paired Samples t-test for the Pre-test and the Post-test Scores in both the Experimental and Control Group

		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2 Tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	CG pretest & posttest	-.487	.986	.160	-.811	-.163	-3.044	37	.004
Pair 2	EG pretest & posttest	-1.010	.957	.151	-1.316	-.704	-6.676	39	.000

4.1.2. Between-group comparisons (Independent-samples t-test)

An independent samples t-test was run to ensure the two groups were not different regarding their performance before treatment. (See Table 4). According to Tables 2 and 3, there was no significant difference between the control (M = 4.18, SD= 1.46) and experimental (M = 4.50, SD = 1.38, t(76) = -0.975, p = 0.332) groups' mean scores on the pretests. Therefore, the homogeneity of the two groups was established before treatment application.

Table 4. Independent samples t-test result for the pretest

Levene's test for equality of variances t-test for equality of means							
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
							Lower	Upper
.045	.833	-.975	76	.332	-.315171	.323098	-.958677	.328335

An independent samples t-test was run to compare the two groups' performance after the treatment. (The results appear in Tables 2 and 5). There was a significant difference between the control (M = 4.67, SD =1.39) and experimental (M = 5.51, SD = 1.46, t (76) = -2.589, p = 0.012 < 0.05) groups' mean scores on the posttest. This indicates a significant effect for feedforward instruction.

Table 5. Independent samples t-test result for the posttest

Levene's test for equality of variances t-test for equality of means							
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
							Lower	Upper
.308	.580	-2.589	76	.012	-.838303	.323854	-1.483314	-.193291

This study, through statistical analyses of pre-test and post-test results, demonstrates that feedforward has positively influenced the enhancement of students' essay writing skills. The findings indicate notable enhancements in students' scores across both overall and individual components. This illustrates that employing feedforward strategies in writing instruction has significantly enhanced students' writing abilities.

The results are consistent with earlier studies highlighting the beneficial effects of feedforward strategies on the writing abilities of learners. In particular, the findings from studies [10], [13], and [14] indicate that the use of feedforward teaching methods plays a significant role in enhancing the quality of learners' writing performance.

4.2. The participants' perceptions toward feedforward

The second inquiry examined the participants' views on the effectiveness of feedforward in enhancing their writing performance. The excerpts from the interview offer compelling qualitative evidence regarding the efficacy of feedforward in enhancing students' essay writing performance. Two significant themes surfaced from the interviews:

4.2.1. Enhancing students' confidence and motivation

A significant number of participants indicated that they felt better equipped and experienced reduced anxiety regarding essay writing following the implementation of feedforward-oriented instruction. This was linked to the initial introduction of success criteria and model texts, which offered a definitive guide for creating high-quality writing. In support of this, a participant noted:

Student A:

"I felt more confident before writing the essay because I already knew what I should focus on. The teacher gave us examples of strong introductions and explained why they worked. So when I started my own essay, I could kind of follow the structure and avoid the mistakes I used to make, especially in organizing ideas."

Furthermore, 4 out of the 5 interviewees said that the feedback motivated them to do better on the following essays, and some mentioned that they were motivated to become creative in their writing. When asked how the feedback was motivating, participants said the following:

"It was easier to get higher grades because of how detailed the feedback was."

"....Because the instructor gives feedback to make my writing better and I should write information that supports my examples and points."

This observation underscores the role of feedforward in empowering students prior to task initiation, resonating with the ideas presented in [10], [11] and [15] regarding proactive guidance. The implementation of structured input before writing effectively alleviated cognitive load and promoted strategic planning, particularly in aspects such as coherence and cohesion, which are commonly challenging for EFL learners.

4.2.2. Goal-oriented learning and strategic awareness

Another recurring theme was the shift in students' mindset from reactive correction to proactive performance orientation. Students noted that knowing the evaluation criteria ahead of time, especially the IELTS band descriptors, allowed them to plan more strategically and avoid previous errors.

Student B:

"It helped a lot that the teacher gave us clear instructions about what makes a high-band essay. We didn't just get our mistakes pointed out afterward - she told us what to do beforehand. That made it easier to write better from the beginning, not just fix problems later."

This response exemplifies how feedforward fosters agentic engagement [21], encouraging learners to take ownership of their development. Instead of waiting for feedback after completing a task, students learned to anticipate expectations and adjust their approach during task execution. Furthermore, these findings align with recent research by Zarrinbadi and Rezazadeh [11], who found that feedforward interventions significantly improved students' writing competencies, including confidence and planning ability.

These outcomes suggest that feedforward should not merely be a supplementary activity, but rather a central pedagogical strategy in EFL writing instruction, particularly where high performance is expected under test conditions.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that incorporating feedforward as a teaching strategy in an essay writing class can greatly improve EFL learners' writing performance, especially in high-stakes assessments like the IELTS Academic Writing Task 2. By shifting the focus from reactive feedback to proactive guidance, feedforward not only fostered greater confidence and awareness of task expectations but also demonstrated enhanced planning and organisational skills. The findings highlight the necessity of advancing past conventional feedback approaches that focus on correcting performance after the fact, shifting instead towards more developmental, proactive strategies that enable learners prior to initiating their writing process. In the realm of curriculum design, integrating feedforward principles into writing programs through methods such as pre-writing workshops, exemplar analysis, and rubric orientation can effectively align instructional practices with the communicative and academic requirements of high-stakes assessments like IELTS. Additionally, training programs for educators ought to incorporate sections focused on the effective implementation of feedforward, emphasising its theoretical foundations, practical approaches, and influence on learner independence.

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